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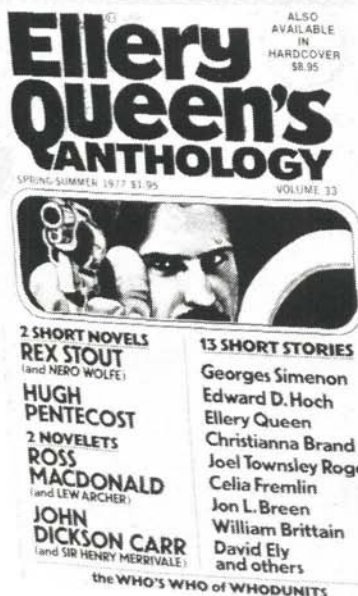
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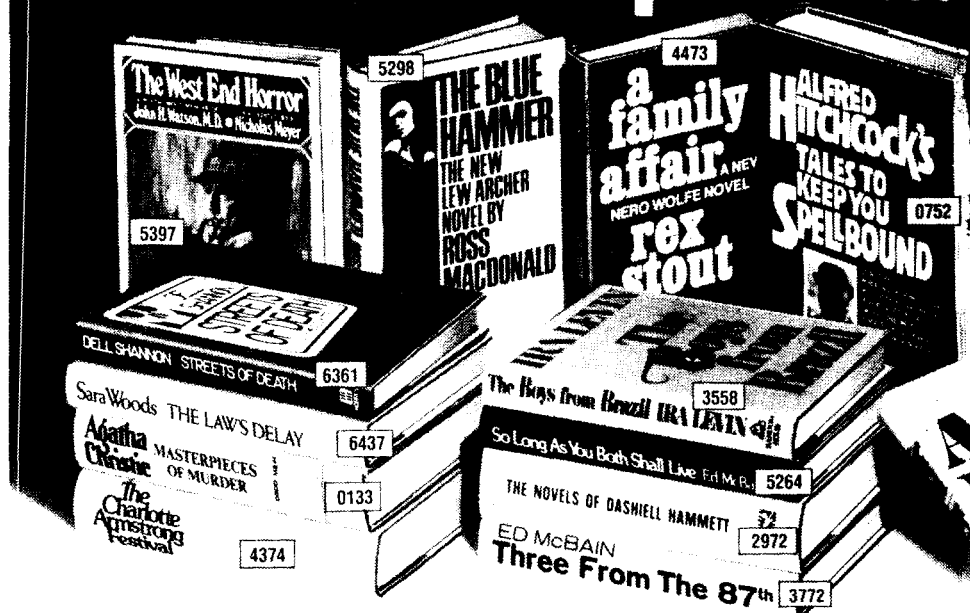
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a **NEW** Inspector Petrella story by

MICHAEL GILBERT

Len and Geoff and Timmy were teenagers. Timmy came from what is called "a good family." He was bright in school, sang treble in the choir at St. Mark's, and was considered a "thoroughly nice boy." And in his own sweet shy way he was just that. . .

THE HAPPY BROTHERHOOD

by **MICHAEL GILBERT**

The Grants lived in Kennington. Mr. Grant worked in an architects' office in the City and had inherited the small terrace house on Dodman Street. It was convenient, since he could reach the Bank Station in ten minutes on the Underground. But it was not a neighborhood which he found really congenial. There was Mr. Knowlson, who worked in insurance and lived two doors up. But most of the inhabitants of Dodman Street were uncouth men, with jobs at railway depots—men who went to work at five o'clock in the morning and spent their evenings in public houses.

Mr. Grant had often spoken to his wife of moving out to the suburbs, where people went to their offices at a rational hour and spent the evenings in their gardens and joined tennis clubs and formed discussion groups. The factor which tipped the balance against moving was Timothy. Timothy was their only child and was now 14, but with his pink and white face and shy smile he could have been taken for eleven or twelve. After a difficult start he was happily settled at the Matthew Holder School near the Oval, and sang first treble in the choir at St. Mark's.

"It would be a pity to make a change now," said Mrs. Grant. "Timothy's easily upset. I've put his dinner in the oven, so I hope he won't be too late back from choir practise. If his dinner gets dried up he can't digest it properly."

© 1977 by Michael Gilbert.

At that moment Timothy was walking slowly down the road outside St. Mark's. He was walking slowly because, if the truth were told, he had no great desire to get home. When he did get there, his mother would make him take off his shoes and put on a dry pair of socks and would sit him down to eat a large and wholesome meal, which he did not really want, and he would have to tell his father exactly what he had done in school that day and—

A hand smacked him between the shoulder blades and he spun round. Two boys were standing behind him, both a little older and a lot bigger than Timothy. The taller one said, "It's a stickup, rosebud. Turn out your pockets."

Timothy gaped at him.

"Come on, come on," said the other one. "Do you want to be duffed up?"

"Are you mugging me?"

"You've cottoned quick, boyo. Shell out."

"I'm terribly sorry," said Timothy. "But I've actually only got about ten pence on me. It's Thursday, you see. I get my pocket money on Friday."

He was feeling in his trouser pocket as he spoke and now fetched out a fivepenny piece and a penny and held them out.

The taller boy stared at the money, but made no move to touch it. He said, "How much pocket money do you get every week?"

"A pound."

"So if we'd stuck you up tomorrow, we'd have got a quid?"

"That's right," said Timothy. "I'm terribly sorry. If you're short tonight I could show you how to make a bit perhaps."

The two boys looked at each other, then burst out laughing.

"Cool," said the tall one. "That's cool."

"What's the gimmick?" said the second one.

"It's the amusement arcade in the High Street. There's a big slot machine, tucked away in the corner, and no one uses it much."

"Why no one uses that machine is because no one ever makes any money out of it."

"That's right," said Timothy. "It's a set-safe machine. I read about it in a magazine. It's a machine that's organized so that the winning combinations never come up. A man comes and clears the machines on Friday. By this time it must be stuffed with money."

"So what are you suggesting we do? Break it open with a hammer?"

"What I thought was, it's plugged into a wall socket. If you pulled out the plug and broke the electric circuit *while it's going*, the safety mechanism wouldn't work. It would stop at some place it wasn't meant to stop, so you'd have a good chance."

The two boys looked at each other, then at Timothy.

Timothy said, "It would need three people. One to distract the attention of the attendant. You could do that by asking him for change for a pound. The second to work the machine and the third to get down behind and jerk out the plug. I could do that, I'm the smallest."

The tall boy said, "If it's as easy as that why haven't you done it before?"

"Because I haven't got—" said Timothy and stopped. He realized that what he had nearly said was, "Because I haven't got two friends."

"We'd better go somewhere and count it," said Len. Their jacket pockets were bursting with twopenny bits.

"That bouncer," said Geoff. He could hardly get the words out for laughing. "Poor old sod. He just *knew* something was wrong, didn't he?"

"He was on the spot," agreed Len. "He couldn't very well say, that machine's not meant to pay off. He'd have been lynched. Come on."

Since the "come on" seemed to include Timothy he followed them. They led the way down a complex of side streets and alleys, each smaller and dingier than the last, until they came out almost onto the foreshore of the Thames. Since the dock had been shut two years before, it had become an area of desolation, of gaunt buildings with shuttered windows and boarded doorways.

Len stopped at one of these and stooped. Timothy saw that he had shifted a board, leaving plenty of room for a boy to wriggle under. When they were inside and the board had been replaced, Geoff clicked on a flashlight. Ahead were stone stairs, deep in fallen plaster and less pleasant litter.

"Our home away from home," said Len, "is on the first floor. Mind where you're walking. Here we are. Wait while I light the lamp."

It was a small room. The windows were blanked by iron shut-

ters. The walls, as Timothy saw when the pressure lamp had been lit, were covered with posters. There was a table made of planks laid on trestles, and there were three old wicker chairs. Timothy thought he had never seen anything so snug and cozy in the whole of his life.

Len said, "You can use the third chair if you like."

It was a formal invitation into brotherhood.

"It used to be Ronnie's chair," said Geoff with a grin. "He won't be using it for a bit. Not for twelve months or so. He got nicked for shoplifting. They sent him up the river."

"Your folks going to start wondering where you are?"

"No, that's all right," said Timothy. "I can say I went on to the club after choir practise. It's a church club. The vicar runs it."

"Old Amberline? That fat poof."

Timothy considered the Reverend Patrick Amberline carefully and said, "No. He's all right."

Mr. Grant said, "Timmy seems very busy these days. It's the third night running he's been late."

"He was telling me about it at breakfast this morning," said Mrs. Grant. "It's not only the Choir and the Youth Club. It's this Voluntary Service Group he's joined. They're a sort of modern version of the Boy Scouts. They arrange to help people who need help. When he leaves school he might even get a job abroad. In one of those depressed countries."

"Well, I suppose it's all right," said Mr. Grant. "I used to be a Boy Scout myself once. I got a badge for cooking too."

They were busy weeks. For Timothy, weeks of simple delight. Never having had any real friends before, he found the friendship of Len and Geoff intoxicating. It was friendship offered without reserve, as it is at that age.

He knew now that Len was Leonard Rhodes and Geoff was Geoffrey Cowell and that Len's father was a market porter and Geoff's worked on the railway. He had enough imagination to visualize a life in which a boy was not expected to come home until eleven o'clock at night, a life in which you had to fight for anything you wanted, a life which could be full of surprising adventures.

The first thing he learned about was borrowing cars. This was an exercise carried out with two bits of wire. A strong piece, with

a loop at the end, which could be slipped through a gap forced at the top of the window and used to jerk up the retaining catch which locked the door. Timothy, who had small hands and was neat and precise in his movements, became particularly skillful at this.

The second piece of wire was used by Len, who had once spent some time working in a garage, to start the engine. After that, if no irate owner had appeared, the car could be driven off and would serve as transport for the evening. Timothy was taught to drive. He picked it up very quickly.

"Let her rip," said Geoff. "It's not like you were driving your own car and got to be careful you don't scratch the paint. With this one a few bumps don't matter."

This was on the occasion when they had borrowed Mr. Knowlson's new Ford Capri. Timothy had suggested it. "He's stuck to the television from eight o'clock onwards," he said. "He wouldn't come out if a bomb went off."

The evening runs were not solely pleasure trips. There was a business side to them as well. Len and Geoff had a lot of contacts, friends of Geoff's father, who seemed to have a knack for picking up unwanted packages. A carton containing two dozen new transistor pocket radios might have proved tricky to dispose of. But offered separately to buyers in public houses and cafés and dance halls, they seemed to go like hot cakes. Len and Geoff were adept at this.

The first time they took Timothy into a public house the girl behind the bar looked at him and said, "How old's your kid brother?"

"You wouldn't think it," said Geoff, "but he's twenty-eight. He's a midget. He does a turn in the halls. Don't say anything to him about it. He's sensitive."

The girl said, "You're a ruddy liar," but served them with half pints of beer. Mr. Grant was a teetotaler and Timothy had never seen beer before at close quarters. He took a sip of it. It tasted indescribable. Like medicine, only worse. Geoff said, "You don't have to pretend to like it. After a bit you'll sort of get used to it."

Some nights they were engaged in darker work. They would drive the car to a rendezvous, which was usually a garage in the docks area. Men would be there, shadowy figures who hardly showed their faces. Crates which seemed to weigh heavily would be loaded onto the back seat of the car. The boys then drove out

into the Kent countryside. The men never came with them.

When the boys arrived at their destination, sometimes another garage, sometimes a small workshop or factory, the cargo was unloaded with equal speed and silence, then a wad of notes was pushed into Len's hands.

The only real difference of opinion the boys ever had was over the money. Len and Geoff wanted to share everything equally. Timothy agreed to keep some of it, but refused any idea of equal sharing. First, because he wouldn't have known what to do with so much cash. More important, because he knew what it was being saved up for. One of the pictures on the wall of their den was a blown-up photograph of a motorcycle—Norton Interstate 850 Road Racer.

"Do a ton easy," said Len. "Hundred and thirty on the track. Old Edelman at that garage we go to down the docks says he can get me one at wholesale. How much are we up to?"

As he said this he was lifting up a board in the corner. Under the board was a biscuit tin, the edges sealed with insulating tape. In the tin was the pirates' hoard of banknotes and coins.

"Another tenner and we're there," said Geoff.

Timothy still went to choir practise. If he had missed it his absence would have been noticed, and inquiries would have followed. The Reverend Amberline usually put in an appearance, mainly to preserve law and order, and on this occasion he happened to notice Timothy. They were practising the hymn from the Yattendon hymnal, *O quam juvat fratres*. "Happy are they, they that love God."

The rector thought that Timothy, normally a reserved and rather silent boy, really did look happy. He was bubbling over, bursting with happiness. "Remember now thy Creator," said the Reverend Amberline sadly to himself. "In the days of thy youth." How splendid to be young and happy.

That evening Detective Chief Inspector Patrick Petrella paid a visit to Mr. Grant's house in Dodman Street. He said, "We've had a number of reports of cars being taken away without their owner's consent."

"That's right," said Mr. Grant. "And I'm glad you're going to do something about it at last. My neighbor, Mr. Knowlson, lost his a few weeks ago. He got it back, but it was in a shocking state."

"Yesterday evening," said Petrella, "the boys who seem to have been responsible for a number of these cases were observed. If the person who observed them had been a bit quicker, they'd have been apprehended. But she did give us a positive identification of one lad she recognized. It was your son, Timothy."

"I don't believe it," said Mr. Grant, as soon as he had got his breath back. "Timothy would never do anything like that. He's a thoroughly nice boy."

"Can you tell me where he was yesterday evening?"

"Certainly I can. He was with the Voluntary Service Group."

"The people at Craythorne Hall?"

"That's right."

"May I use your telephone?"

"Yes. And then I hope you'll apologize."

Three minutes later Petrella said, "Not only was he not at Craythorne Hall on Wednesday evening, but he's never been there. They know nothing about him. They say they only take on boys of seventeen and over."

Mr. Grant stared at him, white-faced.

"Where is he now?"

"At choir practise."

"Choir practise would have been over by half-past eight."

"He goes on afterwards to the Youth Club."

Petrella knew the missionary at the Youth Club and used the telephone again. By this time Mrs. Grant had joined them. Petrella faced a badly shaken couple. He said, "I'd like to have a word with Timothy when he does get back. It doesn't matter how late it is. I've got something on at the Station which is going to keep me there anyway."

He gave them his number at Patton Street.

The matter which Petrella referred to was a report of goods stolen from the railway yard, being run to a certain garage in the docks area. It was out of this garage, at the moment that Petrella left Dodman Street, that the brand-new shining monster was being wheeled.

"She's licensed and we've filled her up for you," said Mr. Edelman, who was the jovial proprietor of the garage. "The petrol is on the house." He could afford to be generous. The courier service the boys had run had enriched him at minimal risk to himself.

"Well, thanks," said Geoff. He was almost speechless with pride and excitement.

"If you want to try her out, the best way is over Blackheath and out onto the M.2. You can let her rip there."

Geoff and Len were both wearing new white helmets, white silk scarves wrapped round the lower parts of their faces, black leather coats, and leather gauntlets. The gloves, helmets, and scarves had been lifted the day before from an outfitter's in Southwark High Street. The coats had been bought for them by Timothy out of his share of the money. Len was the driver. Geoff was to ride pillion.

"Your turn tomorrow," said Geoff.

"Fine," said Timothy. "I'll wait for you at our place."

"Keep the home fires burning," said Len. "This is just a trial run. We'll be back in an hour."

"And watch it," said Mr. Edelman. "There's a lot of horsepower inside that little beauty. So don't go doing anything stupid."

His words were drowned in the roar of the Road Racer starting up. Timothy stood listening until he could hear it no longer.

Petrella got the news at eleven o'clock that night.

"We've identified the boys," said the voice on the telephone. "They both lived in your area. Cowell and Rhodes. I can give you the addresses."

"Both dead?"

"They could hardly be deader. They went off the road and smashed into the back of a parked lorry. An A.A. patrol saw it happen. Said they must have been doing over ninety. Stupid young fools."

The speaker sounded angry. But he had seen the bodies and had sons of his own.

The Cowells' house was nearer, so Petrella called there first. He found Mr. and Mrs. Cowell in the kitchen, with the television blaring. They turned it off when they understood what Petrella was telling them.

"I warned him," said Mr. Cowell. "You heard me tell him."

"You said what nasty dangerous things they were," agreed his wife. "We didn't even know he had one."

"It was a brand-new machine," said Petrella. "Any idea where he might have got it from?"

"Tell you the truth," said Mr. Cowell, "we haven't been seeing a lot of Geoff lately. Boys at that age run wild, you know."

"We've brought up six," said Mrs. Cowell, crying softly.

Mr. Cowell said, "He and Len were good boys really. It was that Ronnie Silverlight led them astray. Until they ganged up with him we never had no trouble. No trouble at all."

It was one o'clock in the morning by the time Petrella got back to Patton Street. The desk Sergeant said that there had been a number of calls. A Mr. Grant had rung more than once. And a boy who said he was Len Rhodes's brother was asking for news.

"How long ago was that?"

"About ten minutes ago."

"That's funny," said Petrella. "I've just come from the Rhodes'. And I don't think Len had a brother. What did you tell him?"

"I just gave him the news."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing. He just rang off. I think he was in a phone booth."

At this moment the telephone on the desk rang again. It was Mr. Grant. His voice was ragged with worry. "It's Timothy," he said. "He's not come home. You haven't—"

"No," said Petrella, "we haven't got him here. Is there any other place he might have gone? Has he got any friends?"

"We don't know anyone round here. He wouldn't just have walked out without saying anything. His mother's beside herself. She wanted to come round and see you."

"I don't think that would do any good," said Petrella. "We'll do what we can." He thought about it, then said to the desk Sergeant, "Can you turn up the records and find out what happened to a boy named Ronald Silverlight? He was sent down for petty larceny about two months ago. One of the Borstal Institutes. See if you can find me the Warden's telephone number."

In spite of being hauled from his bed the Warden, once he understood what Petrella wanted, was sympathetic and cooperative. He said, "It's a long shot, but I'll wake Ronnie up and ring you back if I get anything."

Ten minutes later he came through again. He said, "This might be what you want. I gather they were using some derelict old building down in the docks area. It wouldn't be easy to describe the location. The best plan will be to send the boy up in a car. It'll take an hour or more."

"I'll wait," said Petrella.

It was nearly four o'clock in the morning before the car arrived, with a police driver, and Ronnie Silverlight and a guard in the

back. Petrella got in with them and they drove toward the river.

"You have to walk the last bit," said Ronnie.

Petrella thought about it. There seemed to be too many of them. He said, "I'll be responsible for the boy. You two wait here."

When they got to the building Ronnie said, "We used to shift the bottom board, see, and get in underneath. It'll be a tight squeeze for you."

"I'll manage," said Petrella.

He did it by lying on his back and using his elbows. When he was inside he clicked on the flashlight he had brought with him.

"Up there," said Ronnie. He was speaking in a whisper and didn't seem anxious to go first, so Petrella led the way up.

When he opened the door, the first thing that caught his eye was a glow from a fire of driftwood in the hearth which had burned down to red embers. Then, as his flashlight swung upward, the white beam showed him Tomothy. He had climbed onto the table, tied one end of a rope to the beam, fixed the other in a noose round his neck, and kicked away the plank.

Petrella put the plank back and jumped up beside him, but as soon as he touched the boy he knew that they were much too late. He had been dead for hours.

He must have done it, thought Petrella, soon after he had telephoned the station and heard the news about Len and Geoff. And he made the fire to give him some light to see what he was doing.

"It's Timmy Grant, isn't it," said Ronnie.

"Yes," said Petrella. "It's Timmy." He was thinking of all the things he would now have to do, starting with breaking the news to his parents.

"He was a good kid," said Ronnie. "Geoff wrote me about him."

Petrella's light picked up a flash of white. It was a piece of paper that had fallen off the table. On it was written, in Timothy's schoolboy script, two lines. Petrella recognized them as coming from a hymn, but he did not know, until Father Amberline told him long afterward, that they were from the hymn the choir had been singing that evening.

*And death itself shall not unbind
Their happy brotherhood.*

Petrella folded the scrap of paper and slipped it quickly into his pocket. It was against all his instincts as a policeman to suppress evidence, but he felt that it would be too brutal to show it to Mr. and Mrs. Grant.

a **NEW** short story by
MARY McMULLEN

Mary McMullen is a member of a famous mystery-writing family. She is a daughter of the late Helen Reilly, creator of Inspector McKee, and the sister of Ursula Curtiss, a regular contributor to EQMM . . . This is the story of Maria Rounce, the "invaluable executive secretary, the silently purring engine that ran the world" of the firm's president—Maria Rounce, the super-efficient fifty-year-old girl-Friday who had served her boss faithfully for the past thirteen of her twenty-five years with the company, and who now faced "no further hurt" because she had "hit the bottom of pain" . . .

HER HEART'S HOME

by **MARY McMULLEN**

At ten o'clock on the sunny morning of that terrible day in March, Miss Rounce felt herself more than justified in taking ten minutes to relax at her desk with a cup of coffee.

Her world was in perfect order. Mr. Caudrey's great teak desktop was immaculately clear of papers, his telephone was serenely silent. He had flown off to his week in the sun in Jamaica—Miss Rounce smiled to herself as she mixed metaphors—on greased rails.

She had not only made all his travel arrangements, managed to get him in at his favorite hotel even though they said at first they were full; she had also, over a quiet lunch, made up Mrs. Caudrey's wavering mind for her. Yes, much wiser to skip Jamaica this time, the sun did such disastrous things to the skin; better a week at that luscious spa in Texas . . . why, Mrs. Caudrey wouldn't know herself, and certainly Mr. Caudrey wouldn't know her, when they met again.

© 1977 by Mary McMullen.

She had canceled and rebooked dentist's and doctor's appointments, as he had only made up his mind to go away last week. She'd had the lock on his alligator suitcase repaired, tracked down a pale-peach broadcloth shirt to replace the one with the collar just beginning to fray where it rubbed against his tie. She had filled his office flask with Canadian Club, from the hidden swinging bar in the teak paneling, and tucked it into his attaché case along with four paperbacks by his favorite mystery novelists, titles he hadn't read before. She had checked over his pills, added a big bottle of Vitamin E. And had deliberately not minded, had given him a brave cheerful smile, when he said a peculiar hasty goodbye, hardly even looking at her.

Excuses for this came readily to mind. He was being pressed on all sides. Philip Caudrey was president of Hope & Hayes Pharmaceuticals, still young, mid-forties, handsome, vital, popular. But being pushed, nevertheless, by that blowsy-haired boy Alec Mortimer, who was making such a big thing of the cosmetics division. And under attack from the board because of business conditions which certainly Mr. *Caudrey* had no control over. No wonder he wanted to get away, rest a bit, and regather his forces.

We'll get through, Miss Rounce thought, sipping her coffee. She had been his secretary for the past 13 of her 25 years with the company. Up with him, from District Sales Manager, to Vice President of Sales, to President, the office he had held now for five years.

Perhaps another cup of coffee, and then the boy would be around with the 10:15 mail.

The door of Mr. Caudrey's office opened and two strange men walked in, one dark, one fair, both in Miss Rounce's opinion rather peculiarly dressed. She sat in her own small comfortable room off the big sunswept office. There were folding doors between, but he liked them kept open.

"Can't close the doors on my eyes and ears and memory, Maria, now can I?" he would say.

Feeling a little as if the privacy of her own home had been invaded, she rose from her desk and went over to the men.

"Yes? Can I help you?"

The dark one gave her an abstracted glance and continued in mid-sentence. "... I see a magnificent dark-cave effect, aubergine vinyl walls, no daylight whatever—"

"I beg your pardon!" Miss Rounce commanded. She was a com-

pact woman of medium height; her upright stance made her seem taller. Her pink face, going a bit to jowl, was pinker with indignation. "I am Mr. Caudrey's secretary. Will you please tell me what you are doing here?"

"Larrup Design Consultants, ma'am," the fair one said. "Doing over the office. Didn't your boss tell you? And your little room there"—he walked into it and looked over his shoulder at the other man—"all white? Crazy contrast? Think of it as a surprise extension of his office? A mirrored wall maybe with an etagère, tons of gorgeous green stuff, almost a conservatory effect?"

Her office. *Her* office, her place of being, bandied between these two strangers. Something began to beat in Miss Rounce's throat like a misplaced heart. The fair man's eyes, resting on her horn-rimmed glasses, gleaming little beaked nose, crisp curly graying hair, no doubt accurately figuring her age as 50 or thereabouts, thinking, *You don't go with the mirror and the etagère . . .*

It was a relief in a way when one of her two assistants, Minnie-May, who was in charge of the files, poked her lavender-blonde head in at the door. "Mr. Fenelli would like to see you, Miss Rounce. At your earliest possible convenience, he said."

At any other time Miss Rounce would have said, "Indeed? Then tell him he knows where to find me." But better, for the moment, to get away from this upsetting silliness and try to sort things out. Would Mr. Caudrey have arranged for redecorating without consulting her? Hardly. Fenelli might be able to enlighten her.

She glanced over her shoulder as she left, a loving look that stabbed her, at the fine old ivory and gold Kirman, the glow of teak, the soft rose brocade at the windows, the motionless swift white model under glass of Mr. Caudrey's sloop *Valkyrie*, the photographs in silver frames, one of them, the youngest girl, named Elizabeth Rounce Caudrey for her godmother. Was it all, then, to be violated, her heart's home?

Or maybe—with a delightful secret surge of feeling as she strode upright down the long bright corridor and around the corner—maybe he meant it as a great big marvelous surprise for her.

She knocked at the closed door, studying, during the annoying ten seconds she was kept waiting, the little white-lettered black label: Ronald Fenelli, Personnel Manager. Ronald indeed. Rocco more likely. Next thing you knew it would be Ronald Fennell. Just two more seconds and she would turn and go.

"Come in," Fenelli said, opening the door. "Sit down, Miss Rounce."

She thought afterward that she must have heard at the time every word he said to her, from his swift opening: "I have a most unpleasant duty to perform. I must tell you that effective immediately you are to be separated from the company . . ."

But, always, only faraway bits and pieces remained, like half-caught phrases carried by the wind from some distant hill. ". . . cutting back . . . long and honorable service . . . our executives putting themselves on a budget . . . after your position, naturally you wouldn't want to consider . . . pension on the basis of early retirement, not the larger sum, but . . ."

In the middle of the floating phrases the crystal vision striking. New office like "a magnificent cave," new secretary's office like a conservatory, new secretary, shining and young, to match . . .

". . . as of two weeks from today . . . of course, you may come in if you please and use the office—not Caudrey's, it's about to be torn apart, but I'm sure we can find you a cozy cubbyhole where you can use the phone and so on . . . on the other hand . . . embarrassment . . . Minnie-May can pack up everything of yours, bring it to your place . . ."

A tremor started deep inside Miss Rounce; then, to her horror, she began to shake. Her head shook. Her cheeks shook. Her voice shook.

"But, what have I *done*? Twenty-five years—" Not her voice at all.

Fenelli sighed and then smiled harshly. "Don't make it hard for me, Miss Rounce. This is off the record, and don't quote me, and if you do I'll deny it. You're a woman of the world. Youth's the story today. We must make way. We must make way. You've had your turn, now haven't you? You said it yourself. Twenty-five years."

He stood up, warily eyeing her, waiting, she knew, for some awful, some shaming explosion. One thing that kept her from it, in addition to a quality of iron in her, was the cold knowledge that he was thoroughly enjoying himself.

She stood up, turned, walked out of the office, and closed the door behind her. Around a corner, from the door of the typing pool, she heard a high young voice cresting on a giggle, "The Rounce is bounced!"

Shortly before eleven o'clock Miss Rounce, pale, erect, a poisonous, dangerous bag of pain and hatred, went out for the last time

through the revolving doors of Hope & Hayes Pharmaceuticals.

She lost the next three days more or less completely out of her life. She slept a lot, day and night, like someone recovering from, or contracting, some dreadful disease. She supposed later that she must have eaten and drunk now and then: the teacup in the sink, the soup can at the bottom of the brown paper bag in the little yellow garbage can. Occasionally the telephone rang, unanswered.

There had been flashes of all-too-coherent thought. Of course, that was why Mr. Caudrey had suddenly decided to go to Jamaica. He didn't want to be around when his faithful secretary was dumped, canned, got rid of, fired. That was why he'd hardly looked at her when he said his nasty strange goodbye. He couldn't bear to regard poor doomed Miss Rounce. And it must—bite savagely at the aching tooth—must have been he who said she must go. New offices, new image, new man, to fight back at 29-year-old Alec Mortimer, the hairy terrier snapping at the heels of his glossy English shoes.

Was it dreaming, was it waking, that the darkness had rushed into her mind? *She would somehow fix Mr. Caudrey, Mr. President Philip Caudrey. She would fix Fenelli too, his willing, enjoying instrument. How?*

On the morning of the fourth day she got out of her tossed damp bed. She showered, combed her tangled hair, dressed, and remade the bed with taut immaculate white sheets and a fresh white blanket and a starched white eyelet bedspread. Maidenly, maidenly, she thought. Why did I work so hard all those years? Why did I never sin?

She made herself do an almost impossibly hard thing. It was something she had to know, before—

She called Hope & Hayes and asked for Mabel Ross in Accounting, an old and trusted friend. She cut across Mabel's where-have-you-been and I've-been-trying-to-reach-you. "I can't talk now, Mabel, I'm on my way out—but tell me, what's my replacement like?"

Concerned, reluctant voice. "Oh, you know, the kind they stamp out by the thousands now. Long straight blonde hair. Ridiculous huge pink sunglasses. Legs like a—like a heron. I tell you, Maria, I'm in such a rage. I found out she'd been hired by *him*, Caudrey, last week and was just sort of waiting in the wings—"

"Call you soon," Miss Rounce said, hanging up. Her face was

expressionless; there could be no further hurt when you hit the bottom of pain.

She found herself responding to a schedule that someone else seemed to have thought out for her. She went out and bought groceries. She bundled up the laundry and left it outside her apartment door. She washed, dried, and put away the few cups and dishes in the kitchen. She made a pot of hot strong tea and took it to the typing table she kept set up in her bedroom.

Often, on weekends, she did typing chores for Mr. Caudrey. Articles for trade newspapers—for which she did all the research—personal letters he didn't want to bother with, his address to the graduating class of Morningtown College. The machine on the table was new, bought only last month, an electric; it wouldn't do to have a comma the least bit out of alignment in anything she typed for Mr. Caudrey. She hadn't as yet, in fact, used the new machine. Good. Not that it could possibly come to that.

She closed her eyes in concentration, to collect the odds and ends. A half-heard telephone call to South Carolina, an order to the florist, an accidental glimpse of two figures ducking through the rain into his Mercedes. She hadn't been jealous, when to her all-seeing eye the odds and ends formed themselves into an unmistakable pattern; indeed, she felt a certain vicarious pleasure in the sheer brigandage of it, right under the nose of the Chairman of the Board, and his second wife at that, only married two years ago.

After pulling on a pair of thin white nylon gloves, she began typing. No formal salutation. Not in a letter like this.

"Dear Phillip (he always misspelled, on memos, Mr. Caudrey's first name): I will make this brief and to the point. Dossiers, you know, are more or less my business and I have a complete one on you and Cecelia Hayes—or shall we call her Cissie? Do you, for instance, recall a weekend in Charleston, South Carolina, at the Bluebird Motel? Six dozen white roses delivered to her house the day after Holy Joe Hayes left for the conference in the Virgin Islands? And so on, friend, and so on.

"You're feeling the hot breath of Mortimer and I'm feeling the same from Skillington, who questions some of my interviewing practices with young girls, quite unfairly, I may add. But as my tenure here may not be indefinite, I must make plans. I want from you, in exchange for my dossier, \$50,000, which will be acceptable in five installments—cash, of course—the first to be

placed in my mailbox at home no later than 6 o'clock on Monday. I'll let you know the dates for the other payments. As you may or may not know, I start my vacation Monday and will not be at the office; but I do assure you that your offering will be picked up. As ever, Ronnie F."

Miss Rounce did very well with the scrawled signature. She had had to learn to do Mr. Caudrey's, too, so that no one could tell the difference, the time he'd suffered from a pinched nerve and a resulting wrist malfunction. She addressed the envelope to Mr. Philip Caudrey, 108 Chancery Road, stamped it, put it in her handbag, and reached thirstily for her now half-warm tea.

She would drop the letter, after business hours on Friday, through the mail slot of the main post office. On examination it could be seen not to have been typed on Fenelli's own machine in the office, but presumably on his typewriter at home. Not that it would come to that. Not if she knew Mr. Caudrey. The letter would be destroyed instantly. And then—

A man of powerful rages. And sudden, strong, unhesitating action.

In the meantime there was a little exploratory work to be done. It had been three years since she with most of the executive staff had gone to a large cocktail party at Fenelli's. She got her compact from the parking lot at the rear of the apartment and drove through the pleasant Pennsylvania city-town to a near southern suburb, just now beginning to be developed.

At the bend of a lane lined on both sides with birches was Fenelli's low white-brick ranch house, trim March-drab lawn in front, great shadowy groves of pine trees nodding in the wind on either side of the house and behind it. The lane angled at the house, turned left, and ambled past it to join a main road a quarter of a mile away.

Miss Rounce drove along it slowly, pleased with the anonymity of her sensible black car. That path, through the fir trees—glancing up it, she could see the wink of glass in a window, the edge of a low roof. A secret, silently pine-neededled path.

Fenelli, she knew, kept no servants. A cleaning woman came in once a week—a woman he had got from Mabel Ross, and who enjoyed talking about one employer to another. There was no Mrs. Fenelli in the house among the pines; he was divorced. At the start of his vacation he would, if he followed past habit, spend Monday at home lazing, packing, and closing up the house, then

leave on Tuesday morning for Vail. Fenelli was a dedicated skier.

His reservations were all in order for Tuesday, Miss Rounce learned, when she called to check with the airline.

Mr. Caudrey would be back on Sunday afternoon, late. He would have the house to himself; Mrs. Caudrey was not due back until Monday. He would change his clothes, pour a drink—call Cissie Hayes? Holy Joe Hayes had to go to Memphis for a weekend seminar he was addressing. Yes, call Cissie—then he would go leisurely through his mail.

I'd say between seven and eight, Miss Rounce thought. When it gets dark . . .

If Fenelli was out somewhere Sunday night, then Monday night.

Waiting for the three days to spend themselves, she felt odd, light-headed. Torn from the routine of 25 years, she didn't quite know what to do with her hands and feet and body. Looking in the mirror, she felt an uncertainty as to who she was. If she was not Maria Rounce, Mr. Caudrey's invaluable executive secretary, the silently purring engine that ran his world, then who was she?

But now, on this thinly raining Sunday as darkness fell, this woman had plans, had things to do.

At six o'clock she made fresh coffee and put a vacuum container of it into her tote bag. She buttoned on a thick sweater under the lined all-weather black poplin coat with its enveloping hood. She pulled on zippered black rubber boots over comfortable shoes that would take a great deal of standing still in one place before her feet began to ache.

She wasn't really in her car, driving cautiously through the rain; she was looking over Mr. Caudrey's shoulder as he ripped open the white envelope—good thick paper, but nothing showy—and glanced at the opening: "Dear Phillip." She saw the slow purple which always seemed to surge down, not up—down from the thick creamy swoop of hair over the square forehead; and the veins, beside his large brilliant blue eyes, beginning to raise themselves roily.

She saw his hands, with the beautiful long, strong, square-tipped fingers, reaching into the drawer of the bedside table where he kept his Colt .38. A raincoat donned in savage haste, the hand slipping the gun into the pocket. The sound of the Mercedes starting up, so real and near that she looked with panic into the driving mirror.

Not yet—the envelope was still sealed, the gun in the drawer, the raincoat in the closet, the Mercedes in the garage. Nothing at all had happened yet.

And Fenelli—what would he be doing? Waxing his skis, perhaps, sitting by his fire with a drink at his elbow. (*Well . . . you've had your turn, now haven't you?*) Thinking with relaxed anticipation about his two weeks in Colorado. She had been told that people felt freed, sprung, wonderful on vacation eve; she had always thought how difficult it was to get through the time away from her lovely job.

She approached Fenelli's house from the opposite direction this time, turning off the main road to the west of it into the ambling lane. About an eighth of a mile from the house in the pines was a stark little cottage she had noted on Thursday, empty, a FOR RENT OR SALE sign standing crookedly on its disheveled treeless front lawn. She drove her car behind the cottage and walked the rest of the way down the lane, her eyes adjusting to the wet blue darkness.

Here was the path. She moved along it, branches brushing her softly, rain dripping off the edge of her hood. Lights on in the house. As well as she could remember, his living room was at this end, its side windows looking into the woods, its front ones facing down the lane. Yes, they had gone to the right at the party, to leave their coats in the bedroom. Too soon to move up close to the window.

After a time she began to feel numb all over, with the cold and wet, and the waiting, and the immobility of her position against the bole of a tree, hiding her under a fall of branches.

The woman inside her, the thinker, the planner, the doer, watched what happened at 7:18 while poor bereft Miss Rounce cowered in the rain, appalled.

The sound of the car coming up the lane, slowly, stopping, at a guess, halfway up. The barest rumor of footsteps. The front door-bell ringing. Fenelli's windows were double-glassed and after he opened the door the two men faced each other, mouths moving, like a scene from a silent movie.

Mr. Caudrey, from a distance of about five feet, shot Fenelli. The other man stood for a moment, rocking a little back and forth as though he were considering some matter of grave importance. But his mouth was wide-open. Then he stumbled ungracefully backward and fell across a gold brocade armchair. He wore a dark

suit and Miss Rounce saw no blood. The sound of the shot, muffled by the double-hung windows, seemed to linger in the pines.

Mr. Caudrey stood perfectly still, watching Fenelli. His face was a dangerous purpled red. Oh, do be careful, Mr. Caudrey. Go into the bathroom and take one of your pills.

He finally moved from his frozen stance. Brisk now, he felt Fenelli's pulse, looked for a moment into the open eyes. He scooped up a small portable television set, removed the watch from the dead man's wrist, then began ripping Fenelli's handsome room apart. Desk drawers out, contents in a wild flurry to the floor. A pair of curtains at a front window wrenched down, to lie in a golden heap. He kicked up a corner of the Bokhara rug, took an ornate pansy-painted porcelain clock off the mantelpiece and smashed it on the hearth. Then he went to the front door and let himself out.

The sound of the car starting up again. Not his Mercedes, but the softer sound of Mrs. Caudrey's Chrysler Imperial. Tiremarks—

An odd pride stirred in Miss Rounce. He had done it very well. Mrs. Caudrey wasn't back yet and he could say, if they ever got that close to the matter, that someone had stolen her car while he and she were away. In any case, the police would probably conclude, from the swift staging of it, armed robbery, a scuffle, and yet another sad meaningless death. Money for drugs, maybe.

The newspapers, radio, and television concurred the next morning. Hope & Hayes executive struck down in his home by an unknown assailant . . . armed robbery in quiet Morningtown suburb, the third in four months . . . police questioning known addicts.

Miss Rounce went again to her typewriter. She had slept badly, tossing and crying out warnings in her sleep, but she awoke feeling cleansed and empty.

She addressed the letter to the Morningtown Chief of Police. In it she detailed the name, the time, and the circumstances. The Chrysler Imperial, the Colt .38—"As I understand it, you will be able to match the bullet with the marks in the barrel. Don't look for fingerprints because he wore gloves—rough pigskin, but you might find a pigskin imprint here and there, it is a deeply marked leather. It was a wet night and I assume you check for footprints. He wore a pair of Blucher-style shoes, brown, with crepe rubber soles." At the end of the letter she wrote, "I was

walking in the woods when I passed close to the house and saw all this happen. Don't trouble to contact me as I am leaving the state as soon as I mail this letter." She typed, for a signature, the name of the only dog she had ever owned, years and years ago when she was young, an Irish terrier, Shandy.

She got into her car and mailed the letter at the main post office a little after noon. They would have it by tomorrow morning. She wanted the confrontation to be, not in the privacy of his house, but in the full glare of day, with people around, people to see and hear.

At ten o'clock on Monday morning her telephone rang. Mabel? To tell her what had happened? I can't, I can't. I must. With shrinking fingers she picked up the cold black plastic.

"Rouncey!" His voice was warm and strong and rich. He only called her that on special, superspecial occasions. "I couldn't get you out of my head down there. My own invaluable, irreplaceable Rouncey."

Liar, she thought. You're frightened. You want the old, old security of Miss Rounce to guard you from all harm, as she always had.

But the chilled blood in her veins stirred and rioted.

"To hell with executive budgeting!" he said. "But in any case, the way things have worked out—you've heard about poor Fenelli?"

"Yes."

"There's the job for *you*. You'll make an absolutely magnificent personnel head. I talked to Holy Joe first thing and he thinks it's a great idea. Your tax bracket is going to take an almighty jump, but you can cope with that, Rouncey, right? And you'll be here on the scene, so I can always turn to you for help when my blonde knucklehead—"

There was the sound over the telephone of a door opening, of voices, commotion.

"Oh, God, the police—" His voice became a sort of gasping wail. "Rouncey, *Rouncey*—"

A click. And then there was nothing but silence.

"Q"

a **NEW** short story by

THOMAS WALSH

Thomas Walsh is at his best when he views crime as a human equation. He understands the people involved—the guilty, the innocent, and those caught in the mesh of circumstances. Young Ned McKestin was caught in such a web—a web he had helped spin himself. But now others were caught with him. Now there were Kate and the baby for Ned to worry about. . .

THE DEAD PAST

by **THOMAS WALSH**

But never once was it a dead past, not even years later, for Ned McKestin. After it happened he told Kate and Uncle Gerry the whole story, being that honest with them, but no one else. He had done it, after all. Therefore it was right that he, and he alone, should bear the burden of it. And so he did. He bore it silently, never once able to completely force it out of his mind, not even after three or four years had gone by, and then five, and then six.

He carried it by himself all that time, and his sole comfort was a feeling that he now understood the big secret of human life. To be a straight decent man one simply established straight decent habits. There it was, as simple as that. Then why did he go on worrying and worrying about it?

Yet he did. Occasionally at night, when he found himself tossing restlessly hour after hour; now and again during work hours at the store with Uncle Gerry; but here and there, every so often, he would sense that the dead past was beginning to darken and close in around him, biding its time. Very stupid. How long were the odds now that he would ever see Preston Ruby or Dandy Jack O'Hara again? Yet still. . .

Still. "What's the matter?" Kate sometimes would demand of

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him. "You seem awfully quiet tonight, Ned. What's wrong?"

"No, no," Ned would insist, managing to slip a reassuring arm around her shoulders. "Nothing at all, Kate. I'm just the original quiet man, maybe. I feel fine."

Because his shadow was not her problem. It was Ned's, and Ned deserved it, and could only do the best he could to live with it. Why was it impossible, however, to feel that the dead past was over and done with for him? Why did he have to have the silly idea that somehow, somewhere, even now, it still waited for him? At 24 he knew at last what really mattered to him, and what did not. The important thing was to concentrate on his new life.

And in the year 1975 the new life became more wonderful than ever. Uncle Gerry retired to the Florida Keys with Aunt Mamie and his fishing tackle and left Ned in complete charge at G. G. McKestin & Company, as a third partner.

"I've got enough," Uncle Gerry said to him that night, "and you've earned what I'm giving you, Ned. You've done better than I ever expected up here. You've settled down, thank God, and there won't be a worry in the world for me with you running things. I'm depending on you. You're the best man I ever had in the store."

And Ned was. He had great manual ability at driving a car, and as a handyman at odd jobs around the house, and at fixing almost anything in the electrical line. So by the time Uncle Gerry retired, the firm of G. G. McKestin, TV Sales and Service, 36 Main Street, was one of the biggest and best of its kind in the whole North Country. For 30 years Uncle Gerry had worked day and night to give it the most trustworthy reputation possible, and in the spring of 1975 Ned's one-third interest meant all clear sailing ahead. He and Kate had it made.

"Oh, golly," Kate said, after hugging Uncle Gerry half breathless. "I never had any desire to be rich, Ned. All I ever wanted was to have you and maybe three or four kids. There's only one thing I'd like. Do you suppose we could have our own house now?"

Because Kate had always been a great one for their own house. Until then they had lived in a small apartment over the store, where Ned had often caught her sighing wistfully at night at pictures in home magazines of the newest and most modern in kitchen equipment, or the latest fashion in bathroom fixtures. So that year they got their own house, building it in the woods out of town near the lower lake, with a spectacular view of Whiteface

Mountain in back, and he and Kate had never been so happy.

They had a wonderful summer—almost every week there were cookouts or picnics with friends, or swimming and boating off their own dock—and after Christmas, Kate discovered radiantly that she was pregnant. But there were a few complications about a blood factor, and in the end, on the local doctor's advice, Ned took her down to Albany Medical Center when her time came. A few days later she had a fine healthy boy, no problems at all, and driving home to Martinsville that night, 150 miles north, Ned felt wonderfully exuberant.

He got back about ten o'clock and, still too excited to sleep, mixed a mild Scotch for himself in the kitchen. Just as he was taking his first sip the front doorbell rang. That time, when it turned out to be the dead past in brute fact, there was no premonition of any kind. A neighbor, Ned thought, wanting to hear how Kate had made out down in Albany; and with the drink in his hand and a huge happy grin on his lips, Ned walked out to the front door.

But it was not a neighbor who had seen his kitchen light on and had stopped off to hear the good news. Instead, dapper as ever, it was Dandy Jack O'Hara.

Ned stood frozen, his grin dead on his lips, and Dandy Jack allowed himself a moment of maliciously covert triumph.

"We'll, what do you know?" Dandy Jack drawled, studying with his foxily wizened face and cunningly observant gray eyes the front hall behind Ned. "Sure enough. Nobody but the kid himself. Long time no see, kid. How you been?"

And he did not wait for Ned to ask him inside. He came in, at once establishing the authority between them, removed a dark green Borsalino hat with a negligent sweep of his right arm and tossed it onto the hall table.

"And you know something else?" he went on, glancing at the antique wall mirror with the gold eagle on it, at the soft green carpeting, and at the beautifully waxed old drum table with the big porcelain bowl of fresh flowers. "What a great layout you got, kid. Everything you'd ever want, eh? Guess you did all right for yourself. But how long has it been, anyway? Five or six years, ain't it?"

Ned closed the front door. He closed it numbly, one breathless catch of the heart in him, and with his ears ringing. But Dandy Jack, elegant gold sweater with a knitted white scarf at the

throat, red-and-brown houndstooth slacks, and highly polished English brogues, paid no attention at all to the lack of welcome for him.

"Funny how things happen," he remarked, slipping a cigarette out of his monogrammed gold case. "Like tonight. I'm in a tap-room downtown just to kill a little time, and a guy on the next stool asks the bartender if he heard how Ned McKestin's wife was getting along down in Albany. Now that's kind of an exceptional name, kid—Ned McKestin. But you know me. I start asking a question here and there to see if you're the same guy I once knew. And what do you know? You turn out to be the same Ned McKestin, all right. The kid himself. You know Preston and me often wondered what the hell ever happened to you."

Ned had to clear his throat. It felt dry as desert sand.

"Nothing much," he got out. "I did what you and Ruby did, that's all. I got out as fast and far as I could, Dandy. I bummed rides up here to an uncle I have."

"Yeah, who wouldn't?" Dandy Jack said, still studying Ned with his mockingly observant gray eyes. "Matter of fact, Preston and me got to hell and gone all the way out to the coast. No sense hanging around for trouble, the way we saw it. Got another drink in the house?"

"In the kitchen," Ned told him. "This way, Dandy."

But he was still numb, although with a slight pressing pain making itself felt at the back of his skull. Yet maybe there was nothing at all to worry about, he tried to convince himself. Why should there be? A couple of old friends meeting unexpectedly and exchanging the news with each other. No need to push the panic button. Best that he take this meeting between them just as casually as Dandy Jack was taking it.

"But it looks," Dandy Jack said, noting with approval the glistening new stove and refrigerator in the kitchen, and the alcove near the back door with the new washer and dryer, "you've done a lot better for yourself than me and Preston. We've had to scamper. I mean, a layout like this, and you married and settled down and all. What's wrong with your wife, kid?"

Ned told him, pouring out his drink.

"Well, well, well," Dandy Jack murmured. "How sweet it is. A real family man, eh? Great. But how about showing me around the house now? Like to see how you did for yourself. Come on, kid. Give me the grand tour."

So Ned showed him the whole place, upstairs and down—the basement clubroom, the basement garage with the automatic electric door. But the very odd feeling he had while doing so was that it was not Ned and Kate McKestin's new house any more. Something had happened. Something had moved in. It seemed that it was Dandy Jack's house now, and Preston Ruby's.

Back in the kitchen again, Dandy Jack settled himself comfortably and began talking about old times. It was half an hour later before he got up and reached for the Borsalino hat.

"Seem kind of nervous," he remarked casually, "but don't be. Way out in the woods here, who the hell ever saw me come in? See what I mean, kid? Mum's the word. I'm just up here for a couple of days on a little scouting trip, as you might call it. Leaving first thing tomorrow morning."

Ned followed him out to the hall, the pressure noticeably tightening around the back of his skull. He attempted to make his next question very casual.

"Oh? A little scouting trip, Dandy?"

"Well, yeah," Dandy Jack said, daintily wiping off his fingers with an immaculate linen handkerchief. "Only looking around, that's all. Just in case. But of course there's no telling when lightning could strike. You keeping clean?"

"Ever since," Ned told him tightly, to get everything clearly understood between them. "The straight and narrow, Dandy. My first and last experience. Never again."

"Atta boy," Dandy told him, with another slyly covert grin on his lips. "Nothing like it, they tell me. Still, though—we were all damned lucky to get out of it that time, weren't we? Or all of us but Rod Connihan. He's the one bought it, eh?"

Ned had opened the door, but without putting on the porch light. It was a clear frosty night with a lot of stars, but very dark off in the woods. And suddenly, against the dark, like a confused movie montage, Ned could see himself six years ago at the steering wheel of a big Buick, with Preston Ruby and Dandy Jack darting out to him from the bank entrance. Behind them, crawling and scrambling horribly, was Rod Connihan, blood all over one leg of his gray trousers.

Then more shots had rung out in the blazing stillness that seemed to have frozen all around Ned, and Connihan had sprawled full length on the pavement, at the same time dropping the bag in his hands. "Don't," Ned could hear again, and in the

most breathless and anguished tones he had ever heard, "Wait a minute. Give me a hand, fellow! Don't leave me!"

But there was one more shot from inside the bank door, with Connihan jerking forward at it, and then lying rigidly still. It was only Ned who attempted to get out of the car to him, but Preston Ruby had knocked him back with a savage thrust of his right arm. "Get out of here!" Dandy Jack had begun yelling. "They got him, you damned fool. Start driving the car!"

Six years ago—and Ned was only 18.

But now Dandy Jack, out on the porch steps, turned for one more moment.

"Well, all the best," he said. "Sincere good wishes, kid—like all the postcards have it. I'll only tell Preston I saw you, but that's all. And you know what? I kind of got an idea he's going to be pretty damned glad to hear."

Alone then in the front hall, Ned leaned back against it with his eyes closed and his hands behind him. He remembered himself at 18, all alone on the city streets after his parents had died, and how that Ned had thought Connihan and Dandy Jack were just about the greatest guys in the world. They fed him, gave him a few dollars now and again, took him around—and in return he had fixed up cars for them, a lot of cars that he never inquired about, and had run their errands.

"Might have a driving job for you tomorrow," Connihan had told him one night. "You're some jockey, kid. Just love the way you can cut around a corner slick as a whistle at seventy or seventy-five. How about it?"

"Well, sure," young Ned had replied eagerly. "Of course, Rod. Where are we going to go?"

"Let you know," Rod had told him, winking brightly. "Couple of things to arrange first. Just bring the car around here right after breakfast, that's all. I got the idea it's going to go easy as pie for us."

But it had not gone easy as pie, or not for dead Rod. And alone in the hall now, still with the ugly nausea in him, Ned once more had that bad feeling in him. Somehow not his own house any more; and most likely, if he could be useful in any way to Preston Ruby, not even his own life any more.

Later on, sitting on the edge of his bed and staring off into the dark woods, Ned kept thinking about the last remark that Dandy Jack had made to him. "Pretty damned glad to hear," Ned re-

membered. "I'll tell Preston. I'll tell Preston, kid. I'll tell Preston."

Two days later Ned went down to Albany again, to see Kate and the baby, who were just fine although the doctor wanted her to stay on a few more days for another couple of tests. Ned did not tell her anything about Dandy Jack, however; his problem. Instead he was very cheerful with her, forcing himself; but he went out of her room finally a bit paler than usual, and with his heart heavy in him.

The thing would happen, Ned felt, just as he had always known it would happen. He had too much now, and had got it too easily. He would have to pay. When? How? Those were the only questions. For six years he had not known in what way it would happen, but he had known it would. The dead past was closing in. Preston Ruby had found him.

And that conviction was perfectly correct. It happened that night. It happened in the slight drizzle down in the parking lot, when he saw two men waiting by the car for him. The one in the trench coat and the dapperly slanted Borsalino was Dandy Jack. The one beside him was Preston Ruby.

"Thought we might run into you here," Dandy Jack began affably. "Even waited around till ten o'clock last night, Ned. Look. Preston and I thought you might like to give us a ride with you back to Martinsville. Seems like we got a little unfinished business up there. How about it?"

Ruby said nothing. He did not even bother to say hello. But then he always stuck to the bare essentials in conversation, as Ned knew. Dark hat and overcoat; dark glasses; undersized, very quick body, quick as light when required; calm and narrow white face.

"Well, I don't know," Ned began painfully. "The car's not running too hot. I'd hate it if—"

It was time for the essentials, apparently. Ruby reached over for the car door, opened it, and gestured.

"Not asking you," Ruby said. "Telling you. Get in."

And Ned got in. Nothing else for it. Dandy Jack sat in front with him, and Ruby behind. When he spoke again, Ned's voice was a lot weaker and jumpier than he wanted it to be.

"What do you want to go back to Martinsville for?" he asked them. "What's the business?"

"Wait'll you hear," Dandy Jack said, in the same cheerfully persuasive manner of Rod Connihan six years ago. "Easiest thing

in the world, kid. Just like old times for all three of us. Preston and I decided that maybe we'd like to board with you for a few days. Little company, see—you being alone in the house and all. Feed us real good and we might even throw you a couple of grand when it's all over. Fair enough?"

Ned took the Northway turn without answering, but it seemed to be time for essentials there too. Ruby stirred.

"Keep it right at fifty," he ordered. "We don't want no trouble with the cops."

"Yeah," Dandy Jack agreed. "We wouldn't like to get stopped by one of them troopers, kid. Your interests, understand? This way nobody's going to know we're in the car with you, just as nobody's going to know when you get us back to Martinsville tonight, either. So there ain't a thing for you to worry about, not a thing. You're all covered. All anyone knows but you, me and Preston could be up on the moon."

"Covered on what?" Ned asked grimly, discovering that his hands had become clammy. There was not only Ned McKestin to think about now. There were Kate and the baby. It was necessary to get hold of himself. The thing had happened.

"On the favor we want you to do for us," Dandy Jack said. "It's this way, see? I hear tell a lot of prominent people live in those big camps off in the woods in your neighborhood, all around the upper lake. Saw some of them the other day when I took a ride. Biggest and best one you can't even see from the road—too private. Forest Ridge, it's called. Mrs. James Devereux Murchison."

Ruby said nothing at all in the back seat—not time yet.

"And that old biddy," Dandy Jack murmured almost reverently, "has just about everything there is, the way I get it. Place in Palm Beach, in New York, in Paris, France, in Washington, and the swellest summer camp in the whole country just about a mile and a half from where you live. Paced it off the other afternoon, just to be sure. She invites people and they get flied in there on her private plane. Land on the lake, then go up the mountain on her own private elevator. Built right into it—saw it myself that afternoon, the whole thing. And three chefs, Preston, did I tell you? Meat chef, salad chef, pastry chef. Maybe thirty or thirty-five in help, but only one watchman. Only one watchman, kid. Kind of careless, huh?"

Fifty miles steady on the speedometer, Ned saw; just as ordered. A bad sign? He struggled to rouse himself.

"Yes, I've heard about it," he said. "Never saw it, though. Quite a place, eh?"

"Just lemme tell you," Dandy Jack said, pressing the most companionable of hands on Ned's right knee and squeezing in gently. "You wouldn't believe, kid. A big main house where they all go for their meals, the old biddy and her friends, and then a lot of little guest cottages all over the grounds, so everybody can be in his own place when he wants to be. Met a fellow down in New York who worked there a couple of years ago, and what he says is that the old lady herself lives in one of them guest cottages, of course the nicest one, when she's in residence, which I found out she is now. You can see her cottage right at the edge of the mountain overlooking the lake. Wonderful view from there. That's where she sleeps. Nobody else in her cottage, either. Not even a maid.

"So this guy brings her breakfast in bed one morning when her personal maid is sick, and just as he walks in with the tray she's opening a big wall safe back of some hangings. Holy smoke, he says. Like a damn jewelry store. Rings and necklaces and brooches, and whatever the hell else you can think of. Dough, even—nice fresh packets of it right from the bank.

"I see this guy around for three or four days maybe, treating him like he's the greatest guy in the world, and little by little coaxing the whole story out of him, and then I come up here to check it out for myself. Of course I never tell him my right name and after the three or four days he never sees me again. So don't worry about that part—no connection at all the way I foxed that dumb jerk. You following all this?"

Ned said nothing. Ruby said nothing. Dandy Jack inched forward and tightened his affectionate pressure on Ned's knee.

"So there it is, understand? Why keep all that dough in one pocketbook, kid? Why not spread it around? Who the hell is she to have a setup like that all to herself? Only one thing—how to get away afterwards. Damned easy to block off all the roads up in this part of the state, and to check every car that tries to get in or out for the next week. That was what Preston and me really had to figure out. But of course when I met you, and saw the kind of setup you had established for us—"

"Perfect," Ruby cut in, his dark glasses dangling wearily from his right hand, as if he had become just a little impatient with all this talk. "We don't have to try to get away afterwards. You put

us up. When we get back tonight, you drive into your cellar garage before we even get out of the car, so who sees anything? Who can even guess we're inside with you? After the caper we make sure we've got a clean hour or so to get back to your place, to that basement clubroom of yours Jack told me about. We're quiet as mice in there, we pull down the shades, you don't invite anybody out to your house—and nobody ever knows a damned thing about it. How can they? So what's your complaint, McKestin?"

"Oh, he's in with us," Dandy Jack said. "He ain't a damned dummy, Preston. The kid's all right. When they stop watching the roads, which he can find out easy for us, he drives his pickup truck down to Albany on business, with a couple of big busted television sets in back—just the cabinets, though, and you and I squeezed inside them all the way down. It's like a dream, I tell you. It's all there right in our hands, kid. Don't you see?"

"G. G. McKestin and Company," Ruby murmured, swinging the dark glasses in his hand—almost happily for Preston Ruby. "36 Main Street. Sales and Service. I think it's all there, Jack. What else could we want?"

Ned took one hand off the steering wheel and wiped his mouth.

"But maybe she won't tell you how to open the safe," was all he could think of saying. "And you couldn't blow it, not with thirty or forty servants around. If you even tried—"

"Kid, kid," Dandy Jack said, with the foxy little smile on his lips. "She'll tell Preston. In about ten seconds she'll be damned glad to tell him. I give you my word."

Yes, very probably, Ned had to admit. Mrs. James Devereux Murchison, who looked like a nice ordinary old lady, absolutely no side to her. Once or twice he had seen her on the Martinsville streets, and once she had bought three television sets for the servants from G. G. McKestin. She had a nasal but rather pleasant New England twang, and had looked just like an old farmwife to Ned.

But what would she look like in that isolated cottage of hers when Ruby and Dandy Jack got through? Ned found himself wincing, not wanting even to think of it. Suppose she tried to scream or to make a fight of it? He felt the whole top of his scalp crawling.

"No," he heard himself get out breathlessly. "I don't care how easy it is. I won't do it for you! I was only a kid with Rod Connihan that time, and he didn't even explain first what you were

going to do. I told Dandy the other night. I'm through with that business. I've got a wife and a child now. I won't do it!"

In the back seat Ruby whistled *Night and Day* very softly to himself. Dandy Jack chuckled.

"Look," he said. "Look, kid, with what we know about you, you figure you got any kind of a choice? Then figure again. Use your head. We're including you in."

And that night, trying uselessly to think of a way out, with Ruby and Dandy Jack quiet as quiet down in the basement club-room, Ned realized he was in beyond question. It was not necessary for Preston Ruby even to threaten him. Why waste words? Ned was intelligent enough to see for himself. He had a wife and a child now and a new life—so he had a lot to protect. And Ruby was not a man to be moved by any consideration if you got in his way or spoiled his plans. That attempted bank robbery down in New York City might be still unsolved, but of course the police had the case still open. And just one anonymous phone call identifying the man who had driven the getaway car that day. . .

No, they had him. And he did not have them. He had been foolish enough, not knowing until too late what he was in for, to leave his fingerprints all over the steering wheel of that abandoned Buick; but they had not left a print. He could still be identified through the fingerprints, identified beyond question. But they could not. And the testimony of an accomplice in crime, Ned had read somewhere, would not be accepted in court without corroborating evidence.

No, Ruby had thought out that part too. There was not a hole anywhere, and Ned had no choice. He would do exactly as they ordered or Ruby and Dandy Jack would turn him in. And then what? Five or ten years in jail probably; G. G. McKestin & Company, after all Uncle Gerry had done for him, would never be trusted or patronized again; and Kate and the baby would be left to fend for themselves. The dead past. . .

He heard, smoking silently, two o'clock chime out from the Town Hall belfry; three o'clock; four. It was no use—nothing came to him, nothing at all. The dead past was back again, blacker and more ominous than ever. He had to accept it. Ned McKestin was caught.

Next morning he was making early coffee for himself in the

kitchen when the basement door opened and dark glasses and a narrow calm face—Ruby had always been troubled with bad eyes—looked out at him.

"Think it all out yet?" Ruby inquired softly. "Made up your mind, McKestin?"

Ned, his jaws clamped, kept his two hands on the coffee pot. That was advisable. He wanted to use them at this moment more than he ever had in his life.

"Not yet," he muttered. "Not decided yet, Ruby."

"No?" Ruby said, a faint chilly smile on his lips, so obviously knowing better; just pushing the pin. "Then take your time. Go to the store today, do what you always do, and watch your step. Now bring down some coffee for Jack and me, and don't forget to lock everything up here tight as a drum when you leave. We wouldn't like any visitors, McKestin. We want things just as they are."

All that day Ned sat numbly in his small cubbyhole of an office at G. G. McKestin's, but late in the afternoon, again with set jaws, he took Uncle Gerry's big old .38 revolver out of his desk. There was even more than Ned McKestin and his family to worry about. There was the safety of that one watchman out at Forest Ridge and the physical well-being of a nice old lady named Mrs. James Devereux Murchison. Nobody knew who was in the house with Ned now, in view of the care with which Preston had thought out the whole business. Good.

There was a spade in the basement and a lot of dark empty woods back of the house. Ned McKestin did not want to do anything like that. But if Ruby and Dandy Jack forced him to the last step. . .

But could he actually bring himself to do it? To shoot down two men, even men like Ruby and Dandy Jack, shoot them like caged rats? No, that would mean the dark past would be with him forever. Impossible. What else then? How to manage it?

Nothing came to him until he was closing the store and saw old Charlie Burger walking past on the other side of the street. Ned stopped off at the supermarket for a carton of cigarettes, then made one brief call in the pay-phone booth. It was not even necessary to disguise his voice. It seemed to him that he would never have recognized it himself. "But who's this?" Charlie Burger demanded. "And how do I know that you're not just—"

Ned hung up. He wiped his mouth shakily, the .38 still heavy in his coat pocket, and drove home. But it was a silent meal down

in the basement clubroom that night, just bread and butter, hot dogs and baked beans. Then, with television on, Ruby sat there. Ned sat there. Dandy Jack sat there. Yet undoubtedly there built up a certain tension in the air: zero hour. Which meant tonight, Ned told himself, and probably late tonight, without even the least warning to him. Much better that way, Ruby would have decided. Then early tomorrow they would confront him with the *fait accompli*. And what could Ned McKestin do about it? Nothing at all. Just go back to the dead past.

About ten o'clock he went up to bed, making a bit of noise in the bathroom, then slamming the bedroom door to let them hear; but after that, very quietly in stockinged feet, he tiptoed down. He was still sitting motionless in his dark kitchen, the .38 out in plain view on his knee, when the basement door opened noiselessly and Ruby and Dandy Jack came out. It was three o'clock then, and Ned deliberately raised the .38 so that they would see it. Preston Ruby stopped dead, and behind him Dandy Jack gawked.

"Now I'm going to tell you what to do," Ned gritted. "Tell you exactly. You're going to take my car and drive down to Albany tonight without a care in the world. I've got something to say. You're not going on with this thing. You can't. Because I've—"

"Now, kid," Dandy Jack said, wetting his lips. "Don't start to act up, will you? Preston and I might be willing to cut you in for a full third, say. Could be a hundred grand right in your pocket. What the hell's the matter with you? Why can't you see the thing?"

Ruby said nothing at all; thinking it out, Ned understood, in the Ruby manner. What Ned forgot momentarily, however, was how quick Ruby could be when he once decided to act. Now his head jerked around and he jumped back, as if in blind panic, for the basement door.

"Who's that?" Ruby cried out. "What are you trying to do here, McKestin? Who's out in your back porch?"

And Ned turned to look. It was altogether instinctive, and of course altogether stupid. Behind him there came the impression that something whizzed in the air, whizzed fast and venomously, and he turned back just in time to get the kitchen hammer, the one Kate always hung up on the basement door, across the top of his head. When he fell under it, Ruby was quick as light once more, and Dandy Jack moved in savagely from the other side.

"No, wait," Ned wanted to say. "You don't understand, Ruby. I'm trying to warn you! I called the town police chief this afternoon and he's waiting for you out at Forest Ridge right now. If you show up there, his men will shoot you down like a couple of mad dogs. Listen to me!"

But it came out in a confused shout, and Ruby, getting hold of the .38, slashed down calmly but grimly with it. The last thing Ned remembered was Ruby's face over him and the .38 smashing. . .

When he came to, he was lying face down on the coolness of the linoleum floor, and the illuminated kitchen clock showed him that a half hour had passed. For some reason, Ned understood, it was a very important half hour. But why?

He lay dazedly, trying to think. At last he managed to push himself up, shaking his head, then realized that half an hour was long enough to cut through the empty woods and run over the little bridge on Conklin Creek to the Murchison place. Dandy Jack and Preston Ruby could be out there by now. They might already have knocked out the night watchman, or killed him. But wait—wait a minute! If Chief of Police Burger had paid attention to Ned's anonymous phone call this afternoon—

Distantly, in the direction of Forest Ridge, there was a flurry of gunshots. The last few sounded deliberate, final. Ned whispered a few low words, rested against Kate's kitchen stove, and closed his eyes.

There were no more shots. But presently, from the direction of Forest Ridge once more, he could dimly hear men shouting. . .

"But I guess they never counted on somebody like Old Charlie," little Jack Holleran exulted shrilly the next morning. He was the stock boy at G. G. McKestin's, and now he danced around Ned excitedly. "Two guys, Ned. Seems like they kept shooting and shooting when he tried to warn them, and the one little guy, quick as a cat, winged Harry Johansson in the right shoulder. But Old Charlie had his rifle out and they say he can knock the spots off a playing card at a hundred yards. You hear anything yet?"

Ned, a strange pale smile on his lips, nodded. All night he had been waiting motionless in the shadows of his dark kitchen for Old Charlie to ring his front doorbell. He had not known what the delay meant. He could not imagine.

"So he caught them, Jack? Where are they now?"

"Walter Engstrom's funeral parlor," Jack crowed. "I just stole a peek at them in the back room. After they shot Harry, they both got it smack through the head, the damned fools. Dead as door-nails, both of 'em!"

Ned went into his cubbyhole and sat down numbly. He had thought that when he told them about Chief Burger they would have no other recourse but to do as he said—to get out of town right away. He had tried to warn them, but they had not let him. So now. . .

He covered his eyes with both hands. But after a few moments, steady as rock now, he took three deep breaths, reached out for his desk telephone, and called Kate. At long last the past was dead.



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a **NEW** short story by

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You get the feeling while reading this story—while you are half grinning, half grimacing—that what happened to the narrator shouldn't happen to a law-abiding citizen. So when the "victim" took strong measures of reprisal, you might even have a secret impulse to cheer . . .

ACCOUNT SETTLED

by **ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS**

It was one of those evenings. My wife was out. The baby was kicking up a fuss. And somebody showed up about buying one of our cars. His name was Varney, he said, and he was a small, slightly built man with crewcut blondish hair and an annoying habit of letting his eyes slip away from yours as he spoke. Annoying or not, though, he was the first serious nibble we'd had in the two weeks the ad had been running and, frankly, I'd reached the stage where any buyer looked good.

Anyway, one way or the other I got Tim in bed and myself back outside in record time to watch as Varney inspected the car. It was a three-year-old Volkswagen, and he went over it carefully, kicking the tires, running his hand over the roofline, even peering in at the motor. Finally he dusted off his hands and came over to where I was standing.

"Looks almost too good," he said. "How come you're selling it?"

I shrugged. "Economics," I said. "It's the car my wife uses, and with her not working any more it doesn't pay to keep it."

"Yeah," Varney said. He let his eyes slide away. "I can see that. Okay if I take it for a spin?"

I hesitated only a fraction of a second. I couldn't leave Tim alone in the house. On the other hand, Varney's own car was

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parked at the curb and it was worth at least twice as much as the Volks any day. So I handed him the keys. "Sure," I said. "Take it around the block and see how it handles."

He gave me a quick grin, and maybe that should have warned me. But it didn't. I watched as he backed out the drive and started off down the street and was just turning back toward the house when I heard the second motor start.

It was Varney's car, of course. A redhaired kid who must have been crouching down under the dash earlier sat behind the wheel. He grinned too, gave me a thumbs-down sign, then sped off after Varney.

I was so dumfounded it took me almost a minute to remember to get the license number.

"Stupid," the cop said.

It was later. I'd had plenty of time to cool off, but it still hurt. "You don't have to tell me," I said.

"Not you," the cop said. "Him. All thieves are stupid, but this one takes the cake. Not only did he give you his right name, but he used his own car and let you see it."

"You got him then?"

The cop nodded. "Him and the redhead both. No doubt about it. We'll want you to come down to headquarters to identify them positively and sign the formal complaint."

"Well, sure," I said. Suddenly it didn't hurt so much any more. "What time?"

He said eight o'clock, and the next morning I had my wife call my office to tell them I'd be late and arranged to be at the police station by five o'clock. Even so, I was late. The detective investigating my case had already gone out on another call. It was after ten before he got back and then he had his report to write up. So it was close to eleven before anybody got around to me.

Happily, the complaint was already typed up, based on the information I'd given the day before. There were a couple of typos, including two different misspellings of my name. But by then I wasn't inclined to quibble over details. I signed without comment.

Then they took me down to a small room fitted with a two-way mirror looking into a brightly lit, larger room. The other room was empty, but after a couple of minutes six men including Varney and the redhaired kid filed in. I pointed them out to the cop. He was a beefy Irishman named O'Connor.

"Those are the ones, huh?" he said. "You'd swear to that in court?"

"Hell yes," I said. "That's the whole idea, isn't it?"

"Yeah," O'Connor said. He pressed a button on the wall. "All right, you guys," he said. "You can go now."

The six men in the other room filed out the way they had come. O'Connor turned back to me. "That's it," he said. "Thanks."

I hesitated. O'Connor looked at me curiously. "Something else?" he said.

"Yeah," I said. "What about my car? When do I get it back?"

"Oh," O'Connor said. "You have to wait until after the trial for that."

"Why? It's my car, isn't it?"

"Sure," O'Connor said, "but the lord knows where Varney's got it stashed away, and you can't force him to give it back until it's been proven he stole it."

"I see," I said. "All right. When's the trial?"

O'Connor shrugged. "They'll let you know," he said.

And that, as he said, was it—except that I got caught in the noon rush and didn't get to the office until after one. McBurney, my boss, was nice about it. He let me skip my lunch hour and only docked me for the four hours in the morning.

I didn't hear anything for three weeks. Then I was called back downtown for a pre-trial conference with the state's attorney. It lasted 45 minutes, cost me another four hours' pay, and consisted mostly of my rehashing what I'd already told the police.

But at least, I told myself, things were moving forward. The feeling was reinforced two weeks later when I was subpoenaed to appear in court on June 30th.

That was a Tuesday, and court convened at ten o'clock. I got there early and spent the morning sitting around the room reserved for potential witnesses. There was a TV to pass the time, but it didn't help much, because no matter which channel I picked, the game-show MCs all wore the same smile. Finally, around noon, a bailiff came in and told me court had recessed and if I wanted anything to eat, now was the time to get it.

Used to business lunch hours, I kept it short and was back before one. Court, however, didn't reconvene until two. At 2:30 the same bailiff came back and told me to go home. The case had been continued.

"What do you mean, continued?" I said.

"Just that," the bailiff said. "Postponed. Set back. Call it what you like, only come back in thirty days. Same time."

"Why?"

"Because that's the new trial date."

"I know," I said. "But why didn't they hold it today like they planned?"

He shrugged. He was an elderly man with a paunch filling his shirt and spilling over his belt. "Usual reason," he said. "Defense needs more time to prepare. Now, don't look at me like that. I know how long they had. So does the judge and everybody else. But he's got to grant the request or risk being overturned on appeal because the defendant's rights weren't protected. And you don't want that, do you?"

"No," I said. I shook my head. It was too late to go in to the office even if I'd felt like it. I went home.

July 30th was a Thursday. I got to court early again, but this time instead of going to the witness room I slipped quietly into the courtroom proper. It didn't change anything, but at least I didn't have to wait for the bailiff to tell me when the case was continued a second time. It was only until Monday, and that, I told myself, was a mere three days away.

Monday, however, Varney's attorney was ill—or so Varney reported him—and unable to appear. The judge made it clear he was pretty unhappy about it, but the net result just the same was to postpone the trial one more time.

McBurney gave me an odd look when I went in to the office the next day and told him I was going to need even more time off.

"I thought you'd have all that cleared up by now," he said.

"So did I," I said.

"Yeah." He shrugged. "Well, I guess it just proves the old saying, 'Only a fool goes to law.'"

That was just too much. I exploded. "It wasn't my idea," I said, "I didn't ask to have the damn car stolen!"

He gave me another odd look. "You don't have to be so touchy about it," he said.

The reason I was, of course, was that he was right, and, frankly, if I'd had my car I would have dropped the whole thing then and there. But I didn't have it and so I had no choice but to keep going back like a glutton for more punishment.

Then finally—almost when I had come to believe it would never happen—everybody was present and ready and the trial actually began. It lasted ten minutes. The judge read the charges. Varney pleaded guilty and was sentenced in almost the next breath to one year's probation.

On the way out I ran into my old friend the bailiff. He was chuckling happily to himself. "Never fails," he said. "They drag it out until they can work out a deal and then cop a plea. Bet you he had it figured from the start."

"No bet," I said and pushed past him to catch up with the state's attorney. He was a short balding man named Morgan, and he gave me a big pleased-with-himself smile as I came up.

"Well," he said, "I imagine you're glad that's over."

"That's putting it mildly," I said. "But a year's *probation*. For stealing a car."

Morgan shrugged. "Doesn't sound like much, does it?" he said. "But then basically our case was your word against his. Very iffy. And who knows what they would have done with the fact you gave him the key." He shook his head. "No, all things considered, I'd say we were lucky to get what we did. The important thing anyway," he added, "was to establish guilt."

"No," I said, "as far as I'm concerned the important thing is to get my car back."

"Oh, yes," Morgan said. "Your best bet there, I imagine, would be to take him to court."

I jerked my thumb over my shoulder back toward the courtroom. "I thought that's what I just did," I said.

Morgan smiled tolerantly. "Yes," he said, "but that was the *criminal* proceeding. Recovery of property is a *civil* matter. You'll have to initiate a separate suit on that."

"You mean, hire an attorney? The whole schmeer?"

"Why, yes," Morgan said. "Of course." As if it were the most logical thing in the world.

That evening I sat at the kitchen table across from my wife and tallied it up. I'd lost a week's pay because of all the times I'd been called in and out of court. I didn't have my car back and in all likelihood wasn't going to get it back. Varney, on the other hand, had another black mark on his record. But that was all, and somehow I didn't think it was going to bother him too much.

"It's not right," I said. "It's just not right."

My wife looked at me soberly. "Maybe you should talk to a lawyer after all."

"I already have," I said. "He said it would cost more than the VW's worth, and that's not counting the additional time I'd have to lose from work. And then even if we got a judgment, there'd be no guarantee we'd ever collect."

"So I guess we just chalk it up to experience."

I shook my head. "No," I said, "I'm not going to let them get away with it."

She looked at me wide-eyed. "You aren't going to do anything foolish!"

I shook my head again. "No," I said. "I already did that."

I waited until Saturday because no matter what else, I wasn't about to lose any more pay. I spent the day driving around the city, checking out addresses and locations. Then that evening I phoned Varney at his home.

He started to clam up as soon as he heard who it was. "If it's about that crummy VW," he said, "you know what you can do."

"Actually," I said, "I was calling to see if you'd like to go into business with me—stealing cars on order."

"What is this?" he said. "Some kind of joke?"

"No," I said. "If I learned anything from this little fiasco, it's that crime pays. And I intend to make it pay for me. But I need a partner, one who knows how to get into a locked car and start it without a key—and is willing to do it. Frankly, you're the only one I know who fits the bill."

"Is that right?"

"You know it's right," I said. "You can suit yourself, of course. But right now there's a white Cadillac convertible sitting on the street at 1600 North Jackson. You can leave it there or you can earn yourself a quick \$300 by picking it up and delivering it where I tell you."

He hesitated. "How do I know this isn't some kind of a setup?"

"You don't," I said. "But check the car out yourself and see if it doesn't look all right. I'll call you back tomorrow the same time to see what you decide." And with that I hung up, leaving him puzzling it out on the other end.

I was deliberately late calling him back the next day. Varney answered on the first ring.

"Well?" I said.

"Just a minute." I waited. Then he was back. "Would you mind repeating what you said yesterday," he said.

He'd got himself a witness, of course. Mr. Varney wasn't half as stupid as the police thought. But I didn't mind. I went over the deal again, then repeated my question:

"Well?"

I could almost see him shrug. "What have I got to lose?" he said. "Just tell me where you want me to drop it? Your place?"

"No," I said. "That's the kind of thinking that will get us both in jail. You leave it on the street back of the yards on South Ashland."

Varney whistled. "That's a pretty rough neighborhood, especially after dark."

"That bother you?"

"Not if it doesn't you," he said. "It'll be here tonight."

I hung up.

The next morning—Monday—I left the house early so I could detour down South Ashland on my way to the office. Varney was as good as his word. The Cadillac was where I'd told him to leave it and in just about the condition I'd expected.

The glow was still on my face when I walked into the office—which drew a comment from McBurney. "Hey," he said, "you're smiling. What happened?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," I said.

Varney would, however, and I called him again that evening.

"Your money's in the mail," I said, "and I've got three more orders—a Chrysler, a Lincoln, and a Buick. The Buick's in a garage, but it's never locked. And there's a bonus if I get all three by the end of the week."

"How much?"

"\$100 extra a car—\$1200 for the three instead of \$900."

He thought about it a long minute. Finally he said, "Make it \$1600 for the four, including the Caddy, and you're on."

"You're cutting into my profit," I said wryly, "but all right," and waited for him to get a pencil to write down the locations and descriptions.

Whatever else he was, given the proper incentive Varney was no slouch. He picked up the Buick that same night and the remaining two the next, leaving them all on the street as directed

within a three-block radius of the Cadillac. I checked them all out the same as I had the Cadillac and each time my smile grew bigger. Then on Friday he called me.

"Hey," he demanded, "what happened to that money you were supposed to send?"

"I told you," I said. "It's in the mail."

"Yeah. You told me. Now tell me it takes this long to deliver a letter. You owe me sixteen hundred bucks and I want it."

"And you owe me a VW," I said. "Consider us even."

It took a few seconds for that to sink in. Then he swore. "Think you're smart, don't you, wiseguy?" he said.

"Yes," I said and broke the connection. I waited a couple of seconds for the line to clear, then I dialed the police and told them I wanted to report a crime.

I half hoped they'd send O'Connor, but no such luck. The detectives who came were strangers, but they did what I expected. They listened patiently to what I had to say, then took me downtown to headquarters.

I was an old hand at it by now, so I took a magazine along and sat reading it quietly. The desk sergeant gave me a couple of odd looks, but nobody told me to stop, and I was still reading when they brought Varney in, hustling him through the waiting area and on back into the rear of the station.

An hour or so later they brought him back out and sat him down on the opposite end of the bench from me. He looked at me and shook his head. "You're something else," he said. "You really are." He was sweating slightly despite the air conditioning.

I nodded.

Then one of my detectives came in and took me back to a small room furnished with a plastic-topped table and four chairs. Morgan, the state's attorney, sat at one end of the table. His jacket hung across the back of his chair and he'd loosened his tie. If he'd had hair, he looked like he'd be tearing it.

"Why?" he said. "Just answer that one thing. Why?"

"I already told the police," I said. "I wanted to correct a miscarriage of justice."

"And you figured the way to do that was to set Varney up to steal my car and Judge Murphy's and Sergeant O'Connor's."

Also Varney's attorney's, but if Morgan wasn't going to mention that, neither was I. "It wouldn't have been right to involve strangers," I said.

"Oh, *damn!*" Morgan said. He rubbed one hand across his eyes. "It's the movies or television or something. Everybody's a vigilante." He looked back up at me. "Haven't you ever heard of entrapment?" he said. "It's illegal to entice somebody to commit a crime for the purpose of convicting them. There isn't a court in the country that would convict on this."

True, but then I was already even with Varney.

"And to top it off," Morgan went on bitterly, "down where you had him drop the cars, they steal your hubcaps if you just drive through. Leave a car on the street overnight and they strip it down to a hulk. For all that's left, you might as well have had him drive the cars over a cliff."

I looked straight at him. "I know just how you feel," I said.



DETECTIVERSE

LONG FORM

by CAROLYN T. CREW

Sherlock Holmes drove the I.R.S. wild
With the 90-page tax form he filed.
He'd carefully followed instructions
And itemized all his deductions.

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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

Jane Windle Paynter's first story, "Practical Nurse," appeared in the June 1975 issue of EQMM. Her second story is a long step forward for Mrs. Paynter—in characterization, perception, and lingering impact. This second story has a haunting quality . . . Sister knew how to deal with danger, with a crisis. All Margery had to do was call to sister to come downstairs . . .

SISTER, ARE YOU THERE?

by JANE WINDLE PAYNTER

At dusk, when no customer had appeared, Miss Margery Cranwell's disappointment brought tears. She went from the antique shop which occupied a front room of her Eighteenth Century Connecticut colonial and stood in its fanlight doorway blinking into the bitter January wind. A solitary car passed without pausing. Today of all days, the day her nephew Elliott was coming, she'd prayed for a sale impressive enough to substantiate her recent claims that business was thriving.

Elliott was such a bother! Since his annual visit last July, he'd been calling every Thursday from Philadelphia to pry into her finances, dietary habits, and state of mind. After she fibbed her way through his cross-questioning, his precise banker's voice would reiterate that as her only living relative and as the administrator of her estate he must concern himself with her welfare. Until today's letter, though, she hadn't dreamed his concern would inspire a winter visit.

Last summer's visit hadn't gone too badly because she'd agreed with all his pronouncements and had been careful not to upset him by mentioning sister. Following his usual treat of a round trip downtown for a double dip of strawberry, he'd said, "I'll be checking," and had gone away—to stay away until at least next June, she'd assumed. *Why* did he have to come snooping tonight when she hadn't made a sale in weeks?

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Wait, snooping wasn't his only reason. His letter had said something about taking her somewhere, something that had so puzzled and alarmed her that she'd put it out of her mind until she could consult sister.

She looked disconsolately around the shop, remembering how last week's lone customer had responded "Just looking" to her anxious offer of a discount. Assurances that all the items were family treasures which she and her sister were forced to sell because of changed circumstances had made the customer smile aloofly. Probably he hadn't even believed the evident truth of her statement that the shop had once been their parlor.

And probably he hadn't cared when she'd told him how this landmark house, built by her great-great-great-grandfather, had founded the town which spread west of it along Main Street. Had she confused the story and repeated herself the way sister scoldingly claimed? *That* had been the trouble; the customer had left out of boredom. But surely he'd return, maybe tomorrow. And by then Elliott's visit would have brought sister downstairs and she'd be on hand to sell that man something. Maybe several things!

Margery dried her eyes on the frayed hem of her sweater. She'd take coffee and a snack to sister and read her Elliott's letter. There was nothing sister enjoyed more than besting a villain. She'd send Elliott packing with one brandish of her cane!

That reminded her to get sister's downstairs cane, the carved ebony one, from behind the shop door and carry it into the hall. Setting it against the newel post where sister liked to find it when she came downstairs, Margery noticed that the cane was gray with dust. Sister hadn't been downstairs in a long time, but if she saw that— Quickly Margery rubbed the cane to a gleam, placed it, and went along the shadowy hall, past the closed dining-room door and into the kitchen.

The kitchen was cold although not as cold as the shop. There, she wore extra sweaters, long underwear, and wool socks. The kitchen stayed temperate if she remembered to stoke the massive black cook stove. The table and her rocker were close to it. Spare sweaters and other garments hung on the arms and back of the chair. The table and surrounding floor were littered with empty food containers and wrappers. Food-stained pans and dishes covered the table top. She'd meant to clean up this morning but Elliott's letter had distracted her. Before she'd noticed time passing, she'd had to open the shop.

She took the coal bucket and filled it from the bin on the side porch. Retracing her steps, she noticed last night's snow on the walk. "Get busy, Margery!" sister would say. "Unused muscles are soon useless!" How many times had she said that after their brother, Elliott's father, had married and left them to manage alone? But the wind made it feel colder now than this morning's five below when she'd made a mental note to shovel, then forgotten. Well, not exactly forgotten, just mislaid the mental note.

Elliott's fault, she thought, adding coal to the fire. She got from the window sill the long white envelope with the name of his bank in the corner, drew out the single typed sheet, and stuffed it into her pocket. While the coffee water heated, she set a cup and saucer on a small tray. Some cake would be nice—someone had brought cake at Christmas.

She rummaged in the bread box, ignoring the moldy smell, and found a square of rum cake. It was greenish in spots but after a bit of scraping a sample bite hardly tasted moldy at all. The bread was inedible though. She added it to the refuse in the sink. There must be soup in one of the pans on the stove, enough for her supper.

She fixed coffee and put the cake on the saucer. Then she switched on the light at the top of the kitchen stairway and went cautiously up to the bedroom hall. Outside sister's open door she paused, cocking her head toward the cold, dust-smelling darkness within.

"Sister?" she called softly. "It's Margery, dear, with coffee, strong the way you like it."

There was no answer.

Sister was probably in the dressing room. She spent a lot of time in there lately—why, Margery didn't know any more than she knew why sister sometimes refused to speak to her. The dressing room, once a child's room, connected their bedrooms and Margery always opened its door at night in case she awoke lonely and needed to talk to sister. Years ago they'd talked through the dressing room for hours, but recently sister didn't answer as quickly or as often, and sometimes she told Margery to stop being a goose and go to sleep. That was understandable. After her last serious illness sister needed her rest.

Margery paused inside sister's door and listened, fancying she heard dimly the sibilance of old confidences. "Sister?" she called, and when there was no response she felt her way across the bed-

room with tiny steps. Sliding the tray onto the wide bureau, she fumbled for the box of matches she kept there because the lights in this room no longer worked.

She struck a match and it flared so near her face that she smelled hair singeing. Careful, she must be careful. Once a match had burned her sleeve and another had dropped to the carpet and made a hole.

But this time it was all right. She lighted the candle, illuminating the tarnished silver dresser set and a clutter of candle stubs, medicine bottles, glasses, and scraps of food. She hoped sister hadn't noticed the untidiness. Slowly she turned around.

The high-posted bed was empty, the blankets pushed aside. Sister's glasses lay atop the pile of her beloved books and magazines on the bedside stand. Last winter when sister had been so ill, she'd insisted on reading until—until what? It hurt Margery's head to think how she too had taken sick and had to depend on the ministrations of strangers in the confusion of those fevered days before she roused to the cheerless brightness of a hospital room. When she'd called for sister, they'd said she was gone.

Then Elliott had come and he and the neighbors, the doctor, everybody, had urged her to sell the house. But why? Where could she and sister go? Then one night as she lay sleepless, sister appeared and told her sharply to come home and mind the shop. The next morning, strong with sister's support, Margery had announced clearly and decisively that she was going home and in the end she'd been allowed to. For a time after that, neighbors stopped in or phoned, but their attentions became less and less frequent. No one had come by since Christmas.

Now Margery went to the dressing-room door and opened it a hand's span. The slight pungency of sister's sachet emanated from the crack but there was no sound. Margery took the letter from her pocket and held it up.

"Sister," she said, "what shall we do about Elliott?" She waited. There was no response but—there, she heard a tiny stirring! "He's on his way and he's going to— I'll read his letter." She crossed to the candle and began to read.

"Dear Aunt Margery: Although you assure me each time I call that you are fine, one of your neighbors tells me otherwise. I cannot violate a confidence by revealing his name, but I met him last winter when you were so ill. He says you did not recognize him when he stopped in your shop last week and when he tried to

phone, you didn't answer. I've had trouble reaching you several times too.

"I advised you last winter to sell that house and I see now that I should have insisted. After all, you are almost 80 and even though you say you are managing, in my judgment it is no longer safe for you to be there alone." Alone? What did he mean? "Therefore I have reached a decision. I am driving up in the early evening, January 29, and will bring you back to Philadelphia with me that night. I have found a nice place where you will be taken care of. They have agreed to admit you after hours on the 29th.

"Please be packed and ready to leave when I arrive. Until I see you on the 29th. Your nephew, Elliott."

"You see, sister?" Margery said. The letter shook as she returned it to her pocket. "He'll be here *soon*. You'll have to do something." But although she strained until intense listening made her giddy, she heard nothing. She grasped the bedpost and shut her eyes against the room's slow whirling.

And then she heard—no, sensed—sister saying in that clipped way that meant she was angry: "Don't worry, I'll take care of him!"

For a moment Margery clung to the bedpost in the weakness of relief. When she dared a look around, the room was empty. "Thank you, sister," she breathed. She blew out the candle and went along the swath of light into the hall.

In the kitchen she moved the pan of soup to the front of the stove and rummaged on the table until she found three crackers. She discovered an apple that wasn't too wizened, wiped it on her skirt, and set it beside the soup bowl. Plenty of supper, she thought.

She couldn't help smiling over sister's answer. That was exactly what sister had said about a suitor of Margery's who had persisted even after Margery had told him she could never leave sister. Oh, for a while the flattery of his attentions had made her think she'd like to marry. But sister had known it would never work and finally, impatient with Margery's half-hearted resistance, had said one evening when he was expected, "I'll take care of him!" And she had, for the man had never returned.

Of course the suitor had lacked the armor of Elliott's cold dutifulness. The comparison made Margery gasp. Suppose sister couldn't—but that was ridiculous. Sister always *could*!

A muffled banging—hammering—a loose shutter? No, she

realized, someone was at the front door. Elliott was here! "Hurry, sister!" Margery called toward the open stair door. Then, glad that he had arrived and would soon be gone, she hurried down the hall.

"Elliott?" she said, opening the door and peering out.

"Yes." His mustache looked straighter and his eyebrows closer together. He stepped in on a whoosh of frosty air. "Are you all right? I've been knocking for five minutes." He shed his coat, hung it on the rack, and removed his overshoes. "It's freezing," he said, touching dry lips to her cheek. "You'd forgotten I was coming?" She saw that he was frowning at her holey sweater, her wool socks, her high boots.

"How could I forget? Come where it's warm." She led him into the kitchen. "I was just having a bit of supper. Perhaps you'd like—"

"Nothing, thank you." His disapproving glance flicked from her soup bowl to the greenish cake shreds, the heaped sink and littered floor, and settled on the cupboard, bare except for an overturned macaroni box. His nostrils thinned and his mouth drew in.

She smiled tentatively, wondering what was keeping sister. "Coffee?" she asked to give sister more time to come down.

"Nothing!" he said. "Aunt Margery, I had to leave the bank early and I must be there promptly in the morning. I assume you're ready?"

"Oh, yes, we're ready," she said. "That is, as soon as sister—" Too late she clapped a hand to her mouth.

His squinted eyes bored at her. "Sister? Aunt Margery, please don't start that. You know she died last winter."

That nonsense made her titter and it was such a good feeling that she couldn't stop until Elliott gripped her arm. "Sit down," he said sternly. "I'll get you a glass of water. *Then* we're going."

She took tiny sips while her ears strained for sister's footsteps. Why didn't she hurry? Desperate for delay, she said, "Elliott, where do you intend to take me?"

"Philadelphia. I told you, remember? I've found a good place for you. The Golden Rest, it's called. You'll have your own room and people to look after you."

"But I'm looking after myself and I'm perfectly well and strong. Tomorrow I'll clear both walks so when that customer comes back—"

He gestured impatiently. "Listen carefully, Aunt Margery. I've

put this property up for sale. I told you that weeks ago."

"No, you didn't!" She struggled to her feet, her heart thumping painfully. "You can't sell our house! We don't want—"

"You know you gave me power of attorney last winter."

"No, I don't remember! You deceived me! Sister will deal with you!"

"She's gone, Aunt Margery, *gone!* That's the main reason you have to go to this home. It was all right when there were the two of you but now—" The sweep of his arm took in the whole house. "You can't stay on alone in this drafty old wreck. It's a wonder you haven't frozen. Or starved. And to get right down to dollars and cents," he said in what she recognized as his money voice, "it's going to take every bit of the investment return from the sale price of this house to keep you at the Golden Rest. This house is all you have left."

"But the shop. I open it every day and—"

"And? When was your last sale?"

"Why . . . a few days ago a man came . . . he'll be back tomorrow. Sister has to talk to him because—" Her voice trailed away in the sound of Elliott's pained patient sigh.

He studied her for a moment. Then he said as though he were talking to a child, "I'll tell you what. Let's take a little drive the way we did last summer and stop at that ice-cream place. All right?"

"But sister—"

"She won't mind. Anyway, she never eats ice cream."

That was true, Margery knew; sister said ice cream was full of cholesterol. Well, it *would* be lovely to ride downtown and see lights and people again. And she was hungry, oh, not starving, but she could certainly make short work of a double dip of strawberry!

"Ready?" Elliott prompted. "Where's your coat?"

"On the rack by the front door." He was shepherding her out of the kitchen, but she hung back. "I'd better tell sister," she said.

"Of course."

She went to the stairway and called, "Sister? Dear, Elliott is taking me for a little ride. But we'll be back soon. You'll be down by then, won't you?" Although there was no reply, something told her that sister had heard.

Elliott's firm grip on her elbow guided her down the hall. He smiled as he helped her into her coat and handed her her hat.

He stooped to pull on one of his overshoes but it went in crooked. He tried to stomp it straight, failed, and pulled off the shoe to start over. Margery watched, thinking of the double dip of strawberry. She would take tiny bites to make it last all the way home.

"You'll never see home again, you goose! He won't give you a double dip of anything but lies!" Sister's reprimanding voice was right there in her ear! Afraid to move, Margery began to whimper. Elliott, struggling with the other overshoe, went on muttering to himself.

"What shall I do?" Margery whispered, staring at Elliott's bent head.

And then she knew, for sister had willed her to grasp the ebony cane and their combined strength raised it high, higher, then smashed it down on Elliott's skull. There was a dull crunching sound. He toppled and lay still on the dusty carpet.

"Get him out of here!" sister's words were a ringing in her head and again sister lent her strength to help inch his body through the front door and push it down the steps. He rolled over and settled face down in the snow.

Inside, with the door shut, Margery sank down on the second stair with her face in her hands. She was shaking, not from cold, but from the joyful surety that sister had returned to her, was holding her warm and safe the way she used to after they had passed a crisis together.

After a few minutes Margery picked up the ebony cane, polished it on her skirt, and propped it in its accustomed spot. Who knew when sister might need it again?

I don't believe in poltergeists
Or chartreuse men from space,
I won't acknowledge ghosts until
Encountered face to face.

I've never met a single ghoul,
A witch I've yet to see.
Do you suppose it's possible
They don't believe in me?

DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 465th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine—nearly. Actually, author David Thomas had one story published before, in a now-defunct magazine called "Link," a religious periodical for servicemen. So "The Firebox" is nearly his first story.

David Thomas is in his early twenties, with a Bachelor degree in journalism from the University of Colorado. Shortly after graduation he became a reporter for a weekly newspaper near Denver which, unfortunately, went out of business in the economic crunch. Now he is working "at various jobs while writing in spare time"...

THE FIREBOX

by DAVID THOMAS

The locomotive's cab was dirty. The man who operated the locomotive was dirty. Jeff Adler didn't want to climb into the cab. And he wasn't going to shake that man's hand.

That man was Joe the engineer. He stood framed in the cab window, his hand on the throttle. He was spotting cars full of sugar beets. He and Adler worked for the Crystal Valley Sugar Company. Adler was the company's business manager.

Adler cursed. He began to walk toward the tracks. His ears caught the noises of agony the locomotive was making as it pulled the cars. It sounded like a fat boy who was being forced to run a quarter-mile track. Soon two cars were positioned over the wet hopper. The donkey—that's what everyone called the locomotive—came to rest and groaned. Someone ought to put it out of its misery, Adler thought, as he took hold of the grab irons. He sprang into the cab and faced Joe.

"If it's about the parts for the water pump," Adler said, "I can't do anything. I know that the damn boiler can blow up if there isn't enough water in it. I've been told that. But those parts have to be

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specially made, and no funds have been allocated for the pump. So you'll just have to get by."

Joe had stared at Adler during the explanation. Joe now blinked and raised his gloved hand. Would Adler shake the engineer's hand? He would not. Joe said, "Excuse me, sir," and pulled off the grease-stained gauntlet, perhaps thinking that Adler didn't want to touch the dirty cloth.

At last Adler muttered, "Okay," and grasped the engineer's hand. The men shook, though Adler's heart wasn't in it. Adler hardly knew Joe. The two men lived in different worlds. But Adler had known the engineer's daughter. He had known her intimately.

"I heard about Marcy," Adler said. "It's too bad what happened to her." He cleared his throat. "I sure am sorry."

Yet he wasn't sorry. Marcy's suicide had surprised him. Nothing more.

"Yes, sir," Joe said. "Excuse me."

He brushed past Adler, who stepped back to avoid the engineer's filthy overalls. Joe grasped a line attached to the rear coupler and yanked it, thus releasing the locomotive from the cars full of sugar beets.

"As I said about the parts," Adler went on in a tone that revealed irritation, "you'll have to make do."

"Excuse me," the engineer said. He picked up a shovel and plunged it into the coal bunker. Turning about, he kicked open the firedoor. A fiery smell permeated the air. Everywhere it was black—the firebox, the boiler, the walls of the cab—a hot black. Joe flung the coal through the door and into the blaze.

"Hellish, ain't it?" the engineer said.

Adler nodded. He was staring at the fire.

"It isn't about the feed water pump," the engineer said. "But now that you mention it, that pump is in bad shape. Something could happen. I wouldn't want that crown sheet to go. That steam would drag the meat off your bones."

"Uh-huh," Adler said, his eyes still on the fire.

Joe kicked the firedoor shut. He pulled back a lever on the right side of the cab. His hand then tightened around the throttle handle. He eased the throttle toward himself and the donkey broke forward.

"Damn," Adler cried.

He flung his hands out as he fell against the cab's wall.

"Sorry, sir," Joe shouted. He had to shout. The donkey was breathing hard.

Adler grimaced. Greased coal dust all over his hands. An executive shouldn't dirty his hands. "Damn," he cried again.

The donkey moved away from the cars and the men who were unloading the sugar beets. Joe eased the throttle forward. The donkey slowed and halted.

Adler glared at the engineer and snapped, "What in hell did you call me out here for?"

"It's about Marcy," the engineer said. His hand slipped under his overalls and pulled out an envelope. He offered it to Adler. "I want you to see this."

"What is it?" Adler asked, not taking the envelope.

"It's a letter to you, a letter from Marcy."

"From Marcy?"

"That's right."

Adler wanted nothing more to do with Marcy. He had met her at the company picnic. She was simple and naive. He had had fun with her, and that was that.

"Will you take it?" the engineer asked.

With reluctance Adler accepted the envelope. The front of it read *To Jeff*, in feminine handwriting.

"I—I found it that night," the engineer said. His voice wavered.

The envelope was unsealed. Adler pulled out the folded contents. Joe kicked open the firedoor. He cocked his head toward Adler and said, "I bet that's what hell looks like." Adler frowned. He unfolded the pages. Marcy had written the note on little-girl stationery. The salutation read *My dearest Jeffrey*.

"Excuse me," the engineer said. He wiped his eyes with the back of his gloved hand. Grease and tears smeared his face. Picking up an oilcan, he said, "I'll be back. I've got to oil the connecting rods."

"Sure," Adler said, without taking his eyes off the letter. When he heard the engineer's boots hit the ground, Adler said to himself, "Marcy, you little fool."

The first page told how Marcy had fallen in love with Adler at the picnic. This didn't surprise him. Most women, in Adler's opinion, fell in love with him at the first meeting or soon afterward.

According to Marcy's second page, Adler was the only man she would ever love. "You stupid little fool," he said to himself.

Adler stepped to the cab window and peered out. He didn't see

Joe, so he went back to reading the letter. On the third page Marcy had written that Adler was the first man to make love to her. Hell, I knew that, Adler thought. She was so scared.

Adler raised his hand and wiped the sweat off his forehead. The heat was getting to him. He wondered why Joe had left the firedoor open.

The fourth page told of Adler's rejection of Marcy and her suicide plan. No doubt Marcy had spent hours writing the letter, and no doubt she had hoped the letter would make Adler feel guilty. But she had misjudged him. Actually he felt good. As far as he knew, no woman had ever killed herself over him. Marcy's letter intoxicated him. In his mind the locomotive noises blurred. He began to hear women sighing.

"Damn the heat!" he said.

He kicked the firedoor shut. Where did the engineer go? Adler remembered he was going to oil the pistons or something.

It was then that Adler noticed the two extra pages in the letter. They were of light cheap paper. Broad fingers with coal dust on them had handled the pages. Centered on the first page and printed in a bold hand was this command: *Look at the glass tube mounted on the boiler.*

Without questioning, Adler looked at the tube.

Is there water in the tube? the next sentence asked. No, Adler thought, there wasn't.

He went to the next and last page. One sentence had been centered on the page. It read: *You are going to hell.*

In Adler's mind the women stopped sighing. The engineer had written the last two pages. The glass tube without water meant danger. Not enough water was in the boiler. Instead of fleeing, Adler imagined lobsters being plunged alive into boiling water. A crazy thing to imagine.

The crown sheet, the metal that separated the top of the firebox and the boiler, failed. Steam, savage and clear, grabbed Adler and cooked him and flung him out of the cab.

Neither the police nor the company suspected foul play. The intense heat had consumed Marcy's letter. What was left of the donkey was sold as scrap. Of course the Crystal Valley Sugar Company held an inquiry. "I feel real bad about Mr. Adler," Joe told the examiners. "But that feed water pump needed new parts. And I told him so."

DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 466th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . Murder can sometimes have strange byproducts—a sophisticated conception. . .

Your editor never guessed, after reading this first story, that the author, Mickey Lanford, is a grandmother! Her family includes "a long-suffering husband, three children, three grandchildren, a twin sister," and assorted pets. And what a life of public service she has led! She has been a high-school health education teacher (four years), a registered physical therapist (three years with the Army Medical Corps, specializing in amputee care during World War II), training officer (six years) for Civil Defense and Fire Departments, making over one hundred speeches a year, instructor-trainer in First Aid for the Red Cross (fifteen years); and she has still found time to learn how to pilot a plane (!), play the piano, do crewel embroidery, speak Spanish (teaching a Bible class in that language), and acquire a Brown Belt in judo!

What stories this remarkable woman must have to tell!

MOTIVATION IN ANY LANGUAGE

by MICKEY LANFORD

Mr. Brewster had given me such a bad time on the Santini account that I had actually forgotten how things were outside.

The heat swooped up from the sidewalks of Dallas in a vindictive shimmer and grabbed me as though it had been lying in wait for me all day. Then I remembered, in order, that the car's air conditioning was not functioning, that my bank balance was overdrawn, and that I'd have to get my own supper tonight.

© 1977 by Mickey Lanford.

Again. Mondays and Wednesdays were Jolene's Spanish nights. Fridays she took lessons in French. Jolene was, among other things, a language nut. Sooner or later I'd have to decide just what I was going to do about Jolene. But not right now. I'd had a hard day.

First things first. Off with the coat and tie. Whoever started that stupidity? One hundred in the nonexistent shade, but rising young advertising executive must wear coat and tie.

I ripped them off savagely, hearing something tear, ignoring the fact that I couldn't afford another coat any time soon. The boat had drained the checking account completely. It had been my one personal indulgence. Jolene seemed to absorb every penny I made like a sponge. But oh, that boat! She was what kept me afloat, my head above water, puns intended. My joy, my peace, my solitude. My only real companion. Jolene wouldn't even—no, I wasn't going to think about Jolene just yet.

The steering wheel was a branding iron. I swore as I hastily broke contact and reached for the wheel cover in the glove compartment. My hand found one of Jolene's everlasting language tapes and I could hear the echo of her voice ringing in my ears. "Travis! Your language! *Please*, watch your language." Why should she care about that? She didn't care about anything else concerning me. I'd use what language I pleased. Damn Jolene. Damn Brewster. Damn Santini and his wines. I don't even like the stuff. My idea of a drink is bourbon and branch water. Or a cold beer.

Echoing my thoughts as I swung out of the parking lot was a huge billboard extolling a Texas brew made with the waters from "the country of 1100 springs." I knew that country well—the hill country of Texas. I was born in Bandera on the dude ranch my folks had run for many years. What was I doing in this heat-struck cement canyon anyway?

I remembered the musical Spanish names of those spring-fed rivers—the Sabinal, the Nueces, the Frio, and their icy-cold clarity. *Frio* means cold in Spanish. Now why did I have to think of that? It only reminded me again of Jolene—Jolene and her language study, Jolene and her bowling, Jolene and her latest boy friend. Jolene and anything but me.

Oh, I knew all right. True, I *was* the last to find out, in the classical betrayed-husband tradition. But it hadn't mattered a whole lot until Amy Porter had come to work at our agency.

Jolene's antics would furnish plenty of divorce evidence, but I sure didn't like the idea. Amy liked it even less. I'm not even sure she'd marry a divorced man. That, amigo, is my big problem.

Well, let me get this Santini account, with its accompanying bonus, and then I could decide what to do about my wife. I'd never before hit so dry a well in drilling for advertising ideas on an account. I really must forget everything else and get my mind on business. Brewster made that plain when he mentioned how "preoccupied" I was. Lose my job and I might lose Amy. Get the bonus and we'd have a whole new ball game.

Let's see. Wine . . . what goes with wine? Candlelight. Soft music. Romance, certainly. Maybe I could think up an international angle. How did you say wine in Spanish, in French? With those tapes going day and night I should have picked up a few words myself. Oh, yes. *Vin* in French, *vino* in Spanish. I was beginning to feel better about the international angle and its possibilities. Wine means love in any language, something like that . . . The expressway traffic blotted out further inspiration.

There was no sound as I opened my front door, although I had braced for the usual blast of foreign gibberish. No record on? No tape blaring? The answer lay in the carefully bagged bowling ball lying near the entrance. Bowling? Tonight? Never mind. The quiet was as welcome as the blessed coolness of the refrigerated air.

I felt drained. I needed a drink, a bath, and a good meal, in that order. But Jolene saw nothing strange in expecting me to eat a TV dinner or fix a sandwich three nights a week. I didn't fare too well on the other nights either. My wife was distinctly not the domestic type. In fact, our marriage was next to nothing in *all* departments. *Nada. Rien.* Nothing in any language.

Perhaps it's just as well we never got to start a family. I would have loved some kids, but Jolene had to "find herself" first. Seems to me she found everything but.

I had tried to be patient, tried to understand. Tried everything at first. Even the language bit, although good old English is good enough for me. After practising for weeks I got as far as "*Qué tál, querida?*" and "*Bon soir, chérie,*" and she had laughed until she choked and said, "Forget it, Trav. With that awful Texas accent you'd better stick to 'Hello, how are you?' Or, better still, 'Howdy!'" More hysterics. I hadn't tried again.

According to Jolene I could never do anything right—couldn't

talk right, couldn't eat right. Not enough money, not the right clothes, not enough "class," whatever that is. And always "Travis, watch your language!" All this with a pained look at Texas Travis, the Complete Clod. Well, I did try, but I wasn't fixin' to turn into somebody else entirely. Amy seems to think I'm okay just as I am.

I headed for the kitchen and that cold drink. There was the inevitable note for me on the table. I knew what it would say: "Dear Trav, please fix yourself—" Well, what do you know. It *didn't* start out that way. No, sir. Seems the little lady had other things on her mind.

She burst in on a wash of expensive perfume—prettied, painted, and lacquered from head to toe. For a bowling match? Certainly not for me.

She brought up short at the sight of me, somewhat taken aback. I had left a little early because old Brewster had practically kicked me out the door after Santini left, telling me to go home and not come back until I had something that would make that little ol' winemaker happy. She might have been a little surprised, but that's all. I just wasn't that important. An off-hand wave. "Oh, I see you found my note. Professor Lopez is sick, but I thought I'd go bowling for a change. Mind?" As if it mattered to her.

I followed her, saying nothing, until she'd almost reached the front door. Only then did I answer.

"No, Jolene, I don't mind the bowling. But I do mind you thinking of somebody else even while you're writing me a note to fix my own meal."

She threw me one startled look, then grabbed the note I still held in my hand.

"What are you talking about? Let me see that!" She looked, then burst out laughing, not at all upset. "I did, didn't I?" she gurgled. She held the note out at arm's length and quoted from it theatrically, "Dear John—" She seemed to find it terribly funny. "But that's entirely appropriate. You big dumb jerk. You might as well know. You're nothing to me but a—"

Well, I won't quote the rest. Jolene really should have watched her language. I know mine's not so genteel, but I never did like to hear a woman use profanity. She shouldn't have called me things like that. Anyway, that heavy bowling ball put an end to her remarks, among other things.

I stood there watching the blood slide away from her head and surprised myself by thinking: *Elle est morte. Ella es muerta*. Dead she certainly was. Guess I had absorbed some of those miserable tapes after all.

Hey, I just had a thought! That Santini account. We'd have a layout featuring two beautiful brunettes, each holding up a glass of Santini's wine to toast a tall handsome cowboy. The Spanish girl is saying, "*Salud!*" The French girl is saying, "*A votre santé.*" The cowboy is saying, "It's great in any language!" Santini will love it.

Now where's that drink I just fixed?

Cheers, Santini.



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a **NEW** short story by

E. X. FERRARS

"The dangerous rage that had possessed him only a few times in his life had exploded like fireworks in his brain". . .

THE ROSE MURDERS

by **E. X. FERRARS**

It was on the day that Mrs. Holroyd refused Mr. Pocock's offer of marriage that he first thought of murdering her.

The rejection, so gently and kindly put but so utterly unexpected, filled him first with astonishment, so that he felt as if he had tripped over something uneven in his path and fallen flat on his face, and then with a searing rage.

For a wild moment he wanted to clasp his hands around her slender neck and squeeze the life out of her. But after that flare of hatred came intense fear. He had made up his mind, after his last murder, never to kill again.

On that occasion he had escaped arrest only by the skin of his teeth and he knew that the police still believed he was guilty, although they had never had enough evidence to bring a charge against him. That had been largely because of Lucille's passion for cleanliness. She had polished and washed and scrubbed everything in her little flat at least twice a week, so that the police, in their investigation, had not been able to find a single one of Mr. Pocock's fingerprints.

Dear Lucille. He remembered her still with a kind of affection, partly because she had cooperated so beautifully in her own death. Except, of course, for that business of the roses. It was the love she had had for roses and the pleasure it had given him to bring them to her from his own little garden that had almost destroyed him.

There had been no complications like that about his first mur-

© 1977 by E. X. Ferrars

der. Almost no drama either. He had nearly forgotten why he had committed it. Alice had been a very dull woman. He could hardly recollect her features. However, it had happened one day that she told him in her flat positive way that she did not believe a word he had told her about his past life, that she was sure he had never been an intelligence officer during the war, that he had never been parachuted into occupied France, that he had never been a prisoner of the Nazis and survived hideous tortures at their hands—in all of which she had been perfectly correct; and really the matter had been of very little importance, but her refusal to share his fantasies had seemed to him such a gross insult that for a few minutes it had felt impossible to allow her to go on living.

Afterward he had walked quietly out of the house, and it had turned out that no one had seen him come or go, and her death had become one of the unsolved mysteries in the police files. There had been a certain flatness about it, almost of disappointment.

But in Lucille's case it had been quite different. For one thing, he had been rather fond of her. She had been an easy-going woman, comfortable to be with, and she had never expected gifts other than the flowers he brought her. But one day when he had happened to say how much he wished she could see them growing in his glowing flowerbeds, but that the anxious eye of his invalid wife, who would suffer intensely if she even knew of Lucille's existence, made this impossible, she had gone into fits of laughter.

She had told him there was no need for him to tell a yarn like that to her of all people, and he had realized all of a sudden that she had never believed in the existence of any frail, lovely, dependent wife to whom he offered up the treasure of his loyalty.

The dangerous rage that had possessed him only a few times in his life had exploded like fireworks in his brain. It had seemed to him that she was mocking him not merely for having told her lies that had never deceived her, but for having tried to convince her that any woman, even a poor invalid, could ever love him enough to marry him. His hands, made strong by his gardening, although they were small and white, had closed on her neck, and when he left her she had been dead.

By chance he had left no fingerprints in her flat that day. But he had been seen arriving by the woman who lived in the flat below Lucille's. Meeting on the stairs on his way up, he and the

woman, an elderly person in spectacles, had even exchanged remarks about the weather, and it turned out that she had taken particular notice of the bunch of exquisite Kronenbourgs he had been carrying.

The rich velvety crimson of the blooms and the soft gold of the undersides of the petals and their delicious fragrance had riveted her attention, a fact which at first he had thought would mean disaster for him, but which actually had been extraordinarily fortunate. For afterward she had been able to describe the roses minutely, but had given a most inaccurate description of the man who had been carrying them, and in the lineup in which he had been compelled to take part when the police had been led to him by a telephone number scrawled on a pad in Lucille's flat, the woman had picked out the wrong man.

So the police had had no evidence against him except for the telephone number and the rose bush in his garden. But half a dozen of his neighbors, who had imitated him when they had seen the beauty of that particular variety of rose, had Kronenbourgs in their gardens too, and so Lucille's murder, like Alice's, had remained an unsolved mystery.

Yet not to the police. Mr. Pocock was sure of that and sometimes the thought that he might somehow betray himself to them, even now after two years, that he might drop some word or perform some thoughtless action, though heaven knew what could do him any damage after all this time, made terror stab like a knife into his nerves. He would never kill again, of that he was certain.

But that was before Mrs. Holroyd refused to marry him.

It had taken him a long time to convince himself that marriage to her would be a sound idea, even though he was certain she had been pursuing him ever since she had come to live in the little house next door to his. She was a widow and she believed him to be a widower, and she often spoke to him of her loneliness since her husband's sudden death and sympathized with Mr. Pocock because of his own solitary state.

She admired his garden and took his advice about how to lay out her own, was delighted with the gifts of flowers he brought her, and when he was ill with influenza she did his shopping for him, cooked him tempting meals, and changed his books at the library. And she had let him know, without overstressing it, that her income was ample.

"I'm not a rich woman," she had said, "but thanks to the

thoughtfulness of my dear husband, I have no financial worries."

So it seemed clear to Mr. Pocock that Mrs. Holroyd's feelings were not in doubt and that it was only his own which it was necessary for him to consider. Did he want marriage? Would he be able to endure the continual company of another person after all his years of comfortable solitude? Would not the effort of adapting his habits to fit those of someone else be an extreme irritation?

Against all that, he was aging and that bout of influenza had shown him how necessary it was to have someone to look after him. And marrying Mrs. Holroyd might actually be financially advantageous instead of very expensive, as it would be to employ a full-time housekeeper. She was a good-looking woman too, for her age, and an excellent cook. If he wanted a wife, he could hardly do better.

Of course, she had certain little ways which he found hard to tolerate. She liked to sing when she was doing her housework. If he had to listen to it in his own house, instead of softened by distance, it would drive him mad. She chatted to all the neighbors, instead of maintaining a courteous aloofness, as he did. And she had a passion for plastic flowers. Every vase in her house was filled with them, with a total disregard for the seasons, her tulips and daffodils blooming in September and her chrysanthemums in May.

She always thanked him with a charming lighting up of her face for the flowers he brought her, but he was not really convinced she could distinguish the living ones from the lifeless imitations. But no doubt with tact he would be able to correct these small flaws in her. On a bright evening in June he asked her to marry him.

She answered, "Oh, dear Mr. Pocock, how can I possibly tell you what I feel, I am so touched, so very honored! But I could never marry again. It would not be fair to you if I did, for I could never give my heart to anyone but my poor Harold. And our friendship, just as it is, is so very precious to me. I think we are wonderfully fortunate, at our age, to have found such a friendship. To change anything about it might only spoil it. So let us treasure what we have, won't that be wisest? What could we possibly give to each other more than we already do?"

He took it with dignity and accepted a glass of sherry from her. What made the occasion peculiarly excruciating for him was his

certainly that she had known he was going to propose marriage and had her little speech already rehearsed. It disgusted him to discover that all her little kindnesses to him had simply been little kindnesses that had come from the warmth of her heart and not from desire to take possession of him.

Looking at her, with her excellent sherry tasting like acid in his mouth, he was suddenly aware of the terrible rage and hatred that he had not felt for so long. However, he managed to pat her on the shoulder, say that of course nothing between them need be altered, and go quietly home.

The most important thing for the moment, it seemed clear to him, was not to let her guess what her refusal had done to him. She must never be allowed to know what power she had to hurt him. Everything must appear to be as it had been in the past. In fact their relationship was poisoned forever, but to save his pride this must be *utterly hidden from her*. Two days later he appeared on her doorstep, smiling, and with a beautiful bunch of Kronenbourgs for her.

She exclaimed over them with extra-special gladness and there was a tenderness on her face that he had never seen there before. She was so happy, he thought, to have humiliated him at apparently so little cost to herself. Tipping some plastic irises and sprays of forsythia out of one of the vases in her sitting room, she went out to the kitchen to fill the vase with water, brought it back, and began to arrange the roses in it.

Up to that moment he had not really intended to murder her. He would find some way of making her suffer as she was making him suffer, but when his hands went out to grasp her neck and he saw at first the blank astonishment on her face before it changed to terror, he was almost as surprised and terror-stricken as she was. When she fell to the floor at his feet in a limp heap and he fled to the door, he was shaking all over.

But then he remembered something. The Kronenbourgs. Once before they had almost destroyed him. This time he would not forget them and leave them behind. Turning back into the room, he snatched the roses from the vase, jammed the plastic flowers back into it, and only pausing for a moment at the front door to make sure the street was empty, made for his own house.

Inside, he threw the roses from him as if they carried some horrible contagion and for some time left them lying where they had fallen, unable to make himself touch them. How mad he had

been to take them to the woman, how easily fatal to him they could have been.

He drank some whiskey and smoked several cigarettes before he could force himself to pick the roses up and put them in a silver bowl which he placed on a bookcase in his sitting room. They looked quite normal there, not in the least like witnesses against him. It was very important that everything should look normal.

The next morning, when two policemen called on him, he was of course prepared for them and felt sure that his own behavior was quite normal. But he was worried by a feeling that he had met one of them before. The man was an inspector who now told Mr. Pocock that the body of his neighbor had been discovered by her daily woman, then went on to ask him when he had seen the dead woman last and where he had spent the previous evening.

He supposed that such questions were inevitable, but he did not like the way, almost mocking, that the man looked at him. But standing there, looking at the roses in the silver bowl, the inspector remarked admiringly, "Lovely! Kronenbourgs, aren't they?"

"Yes," Mr. Pocock said, "from my garden."

"I've got some in my own garden," the inspector said. "There's nothing to compare with a nice rose, is there? Now your neighbor doesn't seem to have cared for real flowers. She stuck to the plastic kind. Less trouble, of course. But a funny thing about her, d'you know, she kept some of them in water? Some irises and forsythia, they were in a vase full of water, just as if they were real. That's carrying pretense a bit far, wouldn't you say, Mr. Pocock?"

"Unless there'd been some real flowers there first like, say, your roses. You'd a way of giving her flowers, hadn't you, Mr. Pocock? That's something she told the neighbors. But really you ought to have learned better by now than to take them with you when you're going out to do murder."

"Q"

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME DOSSIER

by OTTO PENZLER

It is almost inevitable that devotees of mystery and detective fiction will be drawn to some accounts of real-life crime and criminals. Not only is truth indeed stranger than fiction, but often the writers who bring their talents to chronicling actual historical events and people have a talent for narration that many fiction writers envy.

Perhaps the most distinguished book in the field that has been recently published is *Hustlers and Con Men* (M. Evans, \$14.95) by Jay Robert Nash. Inaccurately described as "an anecdotal history of the confidence man and his games," it is in reality a cornucopia of loosely connected stories within 15 chapters, each of which is devoted to a different category of hustle. What ingenuity these sophisticated crooks display! Every shell game is here, and every fast shuffler, too, in an entertaining compendium that you'll dip into as long as the book is within reach. When you consider the exhaustive bibliography, glossary of hustler's terms,

and the long chronology of con, the book is, at \$14.95, a steal.

While a good confidence man is regarded among the elite of the criminal community, the murderer may have a vastly different standing. He can attain legendary heights, like John Dillinger and Jesse James, or be regarded with loathing, like Leopold and Loeb and Charles Manson. They, as well as other major American criminals who specialized in robbery, kidnaping, murder, and other unsavory acts, are the stars of Nash's earlier book, *Bloodletters and Badmen* (M. Evans), recently published in paper (\$6.95) and still available in cloth (\$16.95).

It is not unreasonable to suggest that the single criminal who has attracted the most attention and maintained his chilling stature as the king of grisly crime is Jack the Ripper. Because this heinous master of villainy has remained uncaught and unidentified (unless you have read John Gardner's superb *The Return of Moriarty*), his gory exploits are

still a favorite source of speculation and retroactive detective work. One of the more interesting theories developed in recent times appears in Stephen Knight's *Jack the Ripper: The Final Solution* (McKay-Washburn, \$8.95). The ingenious and carefully researched conclusion will startle many: there was no Jack the Ripper—there were three of them! There have been many books about the terrible doings in London's East End, but this is a cut above the rest.

MISCELLANEA: If you are interested in magazines with circulation figures somewhat below *Time* and *Newsweek*, and also like Sherlock Holmes, you might want to try the *Baker Street Miscellanea*. Small but handsome, it is a quarterly publication sponsored by The Advisory Committee on Popular Culture of Northwestern Illinois University in Chicago. A year's subscription is \$4.00 and may be had by writing to The Sciolist Press, P.O. Box 2579, Chicago, Ill. 60690.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by **CHRIS STEINBRUNNER**

Television's yearly "second" season is a time of the knife—as new programming is rushed in to replace shows murdered by the ratings. A fair number of the new arrivals are fair mysteries: forensic pathologist *Quincy* has proved popular enough to merit weekly cases, and his place in the NBC Sunday rotation has been taken by *Lanigan's Rabbi*—three episodes this Spring featuring Harry Kemelman's probing rabbi (Bruce Solomon) joining forces with a gruff cop (Art Carney—also sterling on the cinematic front as the aging private eye in the feature, *The Late Show*). Other equally unlikely investigative teams include *Dog and Cat* (ABC), two undercover

detectives who are opposites in every way, including gender; *Feather and Father* (ABC), featuring a brilliant lady attorney unorthodoxly aided by her not-quite-retired bunco-artist dad; and a revival of those childhood criminologists, *The Hardy Boys* (NBC), alternating weekly with *Nancy Drew*, the Stratemeyer syndicate mystery champs presented with affection and reasonable fidelity. Investigative exposés are the stuffing of *The Andros Targets* (CBS) and *Kingston* (NBC), through which Raymond Burr walks as a newspaperman, and the governmental sleuthing of *The Hunter* (CBS).

Most intriguing in concept is the Quinn Martin NBC series,

Tales of the Unexpected, an anthology of suspense and terror. Writer/producer John Wilder has searched for "stories building towards catastrophe and doom." Originally he called the program *Nightmare*; it was changed to *Tales of the Unknown*, then "network title research" divined that the present name would pull the most viewers. The chilling mood, at any rate, will be set by the ominous tones of narrator William Conrad—for years radio's chilliest voice—who will never be seen on the show.

London television continues to impress. *The Avengers* is back, this time as a *ménage à trois* (Patrick Macnee joined by newcomers Joanna Lumley and Gareth Hunt) — the melodrama as fetching as ever. The BBC has

mounted a handsome new version of *Rogue Male*, drawn from the famed Geoffrey Household novel, with Peter O'Toole as the hunter pursued from prewar Germany to rural England. Harold Pinter and the late Alastair Sim play cameo roles. John Osborne has prepared his version of Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*, and yet another adaptation (this time scrupulously straight) of Rohmer's Fu Manchu yarns is being filmed at the East India docks.

As well, BBC radio (you do remember radio?) last Fall broadcast dramas of Maigret, with Maurice Denham playing the Inspector and Michael Gough impersonating Georges Simenon, narrating the cases before the microphone.

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INTERVIEW: ERIC AMBLER

The history of detective fiction has many giants. The authors who achieve immortality writing espionage tales can be counted on the fingers of two hands, and a few fingers would be left over. One of the most influential writers of spy stories, the first popular writer to show that espionage was not merely great fun but an ugly and brutal pastime, is Eric Ambler.

EQMM: With which book did you first become popular?

AMBLER: It was *A Coffin for Dimitrios* in America, but the

title was *Mask of Dimitrios* in England. The earlier books were successful, but I must point out that there used to be newspaper book-of-the-month clubs in England. I was the *Daily Mail* book for September 1939. You may remember that that was when World War II broke out. People were as keen to read a book then as they were to hear that the sky was falling. And then *Journey into Fear*, which I wrote while I was waiting to get into the army, was published as the *Evening Standard* book-of-the-

month—in the week that France fell. For years, then, I had been fighting the battle with Hitler because every time I had a book, he made a push. The coincidence killed them. There was no space for advertising, much less reviewing. But I would say that what really made me a popular author was that Alfred Knopf kept me in print during the whole war, when I wasn't writing books. More GI's read me in Armed Services editions and other paperback editions than all my previous sales. So I made a reputation during a time when I wasn't writing. It was terribly difficult to come back after the war to write a novel. The army had gotten me into making movies with famous people like Carol Reed and David Lean. After that, writ-

ing a novel seemed very difficult.

EQMM: More difficult than the first one?

AMBLER: Yes—(a) I was 10 years older and ideas change, and (b) I had to live up to what was now a reputation. Howard Haycraft wrote about me in *Murder for Pleasure* as if I were dead. I mean, he wrote very nicely, but it was so pleasant that it made it that much more difficult. I always feel sorry for young writers who hit it with their first book. Success is so destructive. And particularly success of the order we have now. Take *Jaws*. I don't think Peter Benchley laughed all the way to the bank, or any of those glib images. I think he worried about the next book, and that makes you really punish yourself.

THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

Duncan Kyle's *Whiteout!* (St. Martin's, \$7.95) is one of those educational mysteries that tell you in knowing detail exactly how things work in a specialized job or environment—in this case, a U.S. Army research station in the Arctic where British hero Harry Bowes has come to demonstrate his firm's new Hovercraft. A series of strange accidents haunts Camp Hundred, and it is soon clear that, like all fictional Arctic bases, it has come equipped with a homicidal maniac.

Kyle, a painstaking craftsman who knows exactly how to make the reader feel the cold, is also the rare British writer who can do colloquial American dialogue convincingly. And if ever a book earned the label "thriller," this is it. (****)

**** Charles Larson: *Muir's Blood*, Doubleday Crime Club, \$5.95. Again it's a case of solve a murder and save the show (a TV detective series called *Stagg at Bay*) for producer Nils-Fredrik Blixen, one of the best new

sleuths of the seventies. Distinguished style, witty dialogue, a touch of satire, lovingly planted clues to a surprising killer—this one has it all.

*** Mark Elder: *Wolf Hunt*, Ballantine, \$1.50. Charter pilot Wolf Breeson, an adventurer-for-hire in the Travis McGee mold, chases a tape containing corporate secrets around the Oklahoma hills. A lively and entertaining paperback original with an added suspense element: how will Breeson get paid for his work?

*** Lawrence Sanders: *Time to Murder and Create*, Dell, \$1.25. For those who like their mysteries full of ethical conundrums. Ex-cop and unlicensed private eye Matt Scudder, an atheist who gives a tenth of his earnings to whatever church he finds open, investigates the murder of an honorable blackmailer—in unorthodox fashion, of course. (For Sanders in a lighter mood, see his Rex Stout pastiches written as "Chip Hamilton.")

*** Shepard Rifkin: *The Snow Rattlers*, Putnam, \$7.95. New York homicide dick Damian McQuaid enters the world of American Indian art when a guard is killed (with an Apache lance) in a private museum robbery. Good writing, interesting viewpoint, but some incredibly desultory investigation.

*** Michael Delving: *The China Expert*, Scribners, \$7.95. Chinese-art dealer Marius Kagan, another of Delving's Americans-in-Britain, becomes involved in the search

for a stolen porcelain vase, on loan from China for the opening of a new London museum. Fun throughout, and a nice ending.

*** A. J. Russell: *Pour the Hemlock*, Random House, \$7.95. This political spy thriller—shorter, better-written, and probably no sillier than most—mixes fictional events with Watergate facts.

** K. Arne Blom: *The Moment of Truth*, Harper and Row, \$6.95. Translated from the Swedish by Erik J. Friis. A good idea—a serial killer of policemen's wives—marred by poor execution. The dialogue is stilted, and, unlike other recent Scandinavian imports, this one reads like a translation. The conclusion produces a genuine shudder, however.

Among the recent reprints:

The Sunday Woman (Avon, \$1.75) by Carlo Fruttero and Franco Lucentini, translated by William Weaver, is a long, graceful, sophisticated Italian whodunit, one of the best mysteries of 1973 . . . Josephine Tey's 1951 novel *The Daughter of Time* (Pocket Books, \$1.75) finds Alan Grant in a hospital bed trying to clear Richard III of murder charges. One of the detective genre's enduring classics . . . Raymond Chandler's *Playback* (Ballantine, \$1.50) is not the "rediscovered classic" its publishers deem it, but the last (1958), scarcest, and weakest Philip Marlowe novel is still well worth reading and belongs in print.

Hugh Fleetwood's 1974 book *Foreign Affairs* (Pocket Books,

\$1.50) is a skillful if depressing account of a grotesque triangle by an author who specializes in abnormal psychology . . . The latest 87th Precinct reissue is Ed McBain's *The Empty Hours* (Signet, \$1.25), a collection of three typically expert novelets originally published in 1962 . . . Nicholas Blake's *End of Chapter* (Harper and Row, \$1.75) is a delightful 1957 puzzle with a pub-

lishing background, one of several Nigel Strangeways cases now in paperback.

Finally, there is Brett Halliday's *Nice Fillies Finish Last* (Dell, \$1.25), a neatly plotted Mike Shayne case, 1965 vintage, involving an elaborate scheme to beat the "twin double." But no credit to Dell for sending a novel about harness racing to the post with a thoroughbred racing cover!

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DETECTIVERSE

PREVENTIVE MEDICINE

(A reply to C. McInerney's "Terminal Illness,"
in *EQMM*, April 1976)

by AGNES NIBARGER

Take a peek at the ending? *Me*, sir?
I'm a woman who knows what will *please* her!
When I get such a book
I won't even look
At the paragraphs used as a "teaser"!

© 1977 by Agnes Nibarger.

EQMM BOOK DISCOUNT DEPARTMENT

The titles which we are offering this month are listed on the right hand page. These books are regular publishers' editions, the very same as those available in bookstores. Only those books which appear can be ordered; we are not in a position to order other books so please do not include any others on the Order Form.

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REVIEWS OF NEW BOOKS

THE AFFAIR OF THE BLOOD-STAINED EGG COSY, by James Anderson. McKay-Washburn, \$6.95.

"A job in the classic manner."
Ngaio Marsh

The time: the 1930's.

The setting: a weekend house-party at a stately home.

The cast: a dotty earl, continental adventuress, a notorious jewel thief, a clutch of spies, an imperturbable butler, the local constabulary, and, among others, a body in the lake.

The problem: whodunit?

H. R. F. Keating in *The Times* (London) calls it "fun a-plenty"... *The Bookseller* says it has "all the qualities of an early Agatha"... Francis Goff in *The Sunday Telegraph* (London) acclaims it a "triumph of ingenuity"... *The Manchester Evening News* terms it "a superbly puzzling thriller."

CHAMPIONS OF MYSTERY, edited by Ellery Queen. The Dial Press, \$8.95.

Famous men and women have their Hall of Fame, various sports have their Halls of Fame—so why not the mystery story and its creators? If there were a Hall of Fame for the genre, many of the contributors to this series of semi-annual anthologies of stories from *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* would qualify for niches and pedestals and many more would deserve serious consideration. Just a half dozen of the authors whose 2 short novels, 2 novelets, and 13 short stories you will find in this volume are Rex Stout, Hugh Pentecost, John Dickson Carr, Ross Macdonald, Georges Simenon, and Ellery Queen—undisputed champions all.

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	DIS- RETAIL COUNTED PRICE PRICE	
Anderson, James	THE AFFAIR OF THE BLOOD-STAINED EGG COSY	McKay-Washburn	\$6.95	\$5.50
Bunn, Thomas	CLOSET BONES	Putnam	8.95	6.95
Delving, Michael	THE CHINA EXPERT	Scribners	7.95	6.35
ed. by Ellery Queen	CHAMPIONS OF MYSTERY	Dial	8.95	6.95
Jackson, John A.	THE DIEHARD	Random House	6.95	5.50
Knight, Stephen	JACK THE RIPPER: THE FINAL SOLUTION	McKay-Washburn	8.95	6.95
Kyle, Duncan	WHITEOUT	St. Martin's Press	7.95	6.35
Larson, Charles	MUIR'S BLOOD	Doubleday (Crime Club)	5.95	4.75
Maling, Arthur	SCHROEDER'S GAME	Harper & Row	8.95	6.95
McInerney, Ralph	HER DEATH OF COLD	Vanguard	7.95	6.35
Russell, A. J.	POUR THE HEMLOCK	Random House	7.95	6.35
Wylie, John	TO CATCH A VIPER	Doubleday (Crime Club)	5.95	4.75

a **NEW** short story by

DAVID ELY

People have been killed by many weapons—gun, knife, arrow, poison, harpoon, exposure, neglect, blunt instrument. The list is as long as the human mind's ingenuity . . .

THE WEED KILLER

by **DAVID ELY**

Herman Beckley was accustomed to having his way. He was big and pink and loud and extremely rich, and if something bothered him, he didn't waste time. He either bought it or sold it or had it moved away or dismantled or demolished. "Better not get in Herman's way!" was his general warning to the world.

If birdsong woke him early, Herman would get his shotgun and blow the bird to pieces. Any servant not quick enough to please him got fired, and whenever one of Herman's wives showed the least flicker of independence, Herman divorced her, and loosed his lawyers like falcons to keep her from collecting alimony.

What chance, then, did a pair of climbing wisteria vines have against a man like Herman?

Herman encountered the wisteria that spring on a trip to Europe with his sixth wife, Martha, a timid little secretary whom he had browbeaten into marriage. Herman didn't like Europe, but since he couldn't buy it and have it disposed of, and since the legal actions of his previous five wives made it inadvisable for him to return soon to America, he grumpily agreed to settle in Rome for a few months.

"Shall we rent a little place?" Martha submissively inquired.

"Rent? Hell, no, I won't rent," said Herman. "I'll *buy*, and then if it don't suit me, I'll change it around."

Herman bought an ancient palazzo in one of the little streets off Piazza Navona. It came exquisitely furnished, and in such a re-

© 1977 by David Ely.

markable jumble of periods that Martha felt she was entering a delightful little private museum—but she knew Herman, and so before he could form his own opinion, she pretended to be disappointed. “Oh, these old things are hideous,” she said. “Herman, we must get rid of them right away.”

Herman didn't like anybody else to say “must” (even the word “we” he found offensive), and as Martha hoped, he became contrary. “This stuff ain't so bad,” he said. “I like it, anyhow, and that's what counts.” A vague suspicion crossed his mind that Martha had outwitted him, which made him furious, but he was too stubborn to reverse himself. “I say we keep the whole caboodle,” he shouted, his pink face flushing.

He took a threatening step her way and lurched against a splendid little baroque chair, all delicate whorls and scrolls. “But not this piece of junk,” he cried, and to vent his rage he snatched it up and smashed it to splinters on the hearth.

The palazzo was also furnished with an elderly servant named Antonio, whose deferential manner refreshed Herman's self-esteem. Herman called him Tony. “Hey, Tony, bring me a drink,” he'd roar, and after he'd had a few drinks he would call Antonio by other names, the most flattering of which was an insulting ethnic epithet. Antonio betrayed no resentment. At most, his impassive gaze might shift to Martha, whose embarrassment he seemed to acknowledge with an almost imperceptible nod.

Herman Beckley wasn't completely without refinement. He could appreciate a good view. “Give me a view and a bottle,” he would say, “and the rest of the world can go to hell for all I care!” There was a particularly good view from the terrace on the roof of the palazzo. All Rome spread out before his eyes. After a hard day berating his lawyers and company presidents by transatlantic telephone, Herman enjoyed a relaxing booze up there in the waning light of the sun. He would loosen his belt and untie his shoes, and use the street below as both spittoon and ashtray. “Rome ain't got the class of Indianapolis,” he would tell Martha, “but for a (deleted) town it's okay, I guess.”

It was only after two weeks of residence that Herman's perceptions informed him of the existence of the wisteria, which Martha had admired from the moment she had stepped into the interior courtyard where it was rooted. There were two plants, whose thick vines embraced the walls, twisting up floor by floor in graceful turns and loops all the way to the top, where they linked

above the terrace, providing a canopy which soon would burst into a cascade of blossoms. Already the buds were swelling.

"What's that stuff, huh?" Herman asked suspiciously one day when his bleary eye fell on the first blooms high on the terrace, warmed by the sun. Martha explained what it was. "Antonio says the vines are older than anybody can remember," she told Herman. "He says they may even go back to Roman times. They couldn't really be that old, but anyway they'll be beautiful when they flower. They'll turn the walls into a garden, and the terrace will be gorgeous."

"Well, they better not mess up my view, that's all I got to say," Herman said sulkily.

"There are two of them," Martha went on. "One is a little bigger, and it will have lavender blossoms. The other will be all white. Antonio says they've always been called by names, just as if they were people. The lavender one is called Lui, and the white one is Lei—that means 'he' and 'she' in Italian. See? They climb all the way up the inside walls to the top, and up here they sort of hold hands. Isn't it sweet?"

Herman snorted derisively. "Why, that's the nuttiest thing I ever heard. Vines holding hands!" He tipped back his head to drain his glass. "Hey, you run down and bring me up some more booze, and do it fast—and don't let me catch you listening to any more of that old guy's stories, hear?" To emphasize his point, Herman reached out one big pink hand and ripped off one of Lei's white blossoms, tearing it to shreds.

Each day was a little longer and a little warmer than the one before. Lui and Lei greeted the Roman spring with clouds of fragrant blooms. On the terrace they twined together tenderly, flinging out garlands of delicate white and lavender bells that danced in the breeze and chimed music that only the vagrant bees could hear.

Martha liked to think of them as a comfortable and affectionate husband and wife, whose love had deepened with the years and kept them young—Lei with her fresh white flowers, still like a bride, and Lui, darker and stronger, holding her with a playful protectiveness. Ah, Martha thought, if only she had a marriage like that!

Martha liked to talk to Antonio about the wisteria, but she did so only when Herman was busy telephoning. "Don't you ever have to cut it back?" she asked the old servant. "In America the wis-

teria is terribly strong, and it grows so quickly. Sometimes the vines force their way right into the houses. They can tear shingles off the roofs and even pull down walls if they aren't trimmed."

"Our vines are very strong too, Signora," Antonio replied. "And their growth is great. On a summer day a new shoot can grow this much"—he held his hands apart, and smiled at her—"but we never cut them. Lui and Lei, they know where they should grow, and where they should not grow. They would never damage the palazzo. It is their home too. They are a part of it now, just like the walls they grow on. They do not destroy. They support."

Herman was aware of Martha's fondness for the wisteria, and he didn't care for it. "Them vines stink," he complained as he sat drinking on the terrace. Martha incautiously remarked that she didn't mind the fragrance. Herman gave her a nasty glance. "Listen," he snarled, "when I say something stinks, it stinks. And they ain't flowers, they're weeds. That's all they are, just weeds—filthy, stinking weeds."

Martha didn't say anything this time, but she looked distressed, which offended Herman further. He'd made it clear he didn't care for the wisteria, hadn't he? Well, by God, if she liked something he didn't like, that was disloyalty. The very idea made him angrier.

"I say them vines are cruddy smelly weeds," he said furiously, "and I'm the one who pays the bills around here, so you tell me, am I right or wrong?"

"You're right, Herman," Martha said meekly, her head lowered.

"You say it too, then. You say what I said, you hear?"

"The vines are weeds," Martha said softly, not raising her head.

"Cruddy smelly weeds!"

"Cruddy . . . smelly . . . weeds," Martha whispered, and then she burst into tears, and hurried down to her room.

Herman wasn't mollified by Martha's submission to his judgment. The wisteria continued to bother him. His aversion to it grew day by day. He began to feel a destructive desire rising within him which was far from an unpleasant sensation, and one he had experienced many times in the past.

"Better look out," he would say threateningly to the vines, shaking his fist. "One false move—and you're washed up, get it? Nobody messes around with Herman Beckley, understand?"

He kept a vigilant eye on Martha, and noticed with satisfaction that she hardly ever came up to the terrace any more, and kept

her head averted when she passed through the courtyard below, not even daring to glance at the climbing vines.

One afternoon, however, Herman came up to the terrace to find her standing beneath the canopy of flowers with a rapt smile on her face, reaching up to touch, with gentle fingers, the white and lavender blossoms shining in the sunlight. She gave a guilty little gasp when she saw him, but it was too late.

"That does it," Herman growled, punching the buzzer that rang in the kitchen below.

Antonio soon appeared in answer to the summons.

"Okay, Tony," Herman told him. "Go get a hatchet or something and cut these vines. Chop 'em off, understand?"

Antonio looked from Herman's big pink face to Martha's little pale one, but made no response.

"You hear what I say, Tony?" said Herman angrily. "This wisteria, I want it cut off my terrace—so make it snappy."

Antonio shook his head.

Herman goggled at him. He began snuffing and grunting, and his little eyes got smaller still.

"The vines," said Antonio calmly, "cannot be cut."

"What the hell do you mean, they can't be cut? They're *my* vines, by God," roared Herman, flushing red, "and I can cut them down to toothpicks if I want—so you'd better run off and grab an ax or a saw or some damned thing, and hustle back up and do like I say."

"I must warn you," said Antonio formally, "not to harm the vines."

Herman's red shaded into purple, and perspiration burst out all over him. "You're fired!" he howled. "Get out!" And then he made a lunge, not at Antonio, but at one of the blossoming vines, seizing it in his hands and wrenching at it vainly. Martha tried to intervene, but Herman shoved her aside so brusquely that she would have fallen if Antonio hadn't caught her elbow and steadied her.

"Better leave, Signora," Antonio said to her quietly. "He will regret what he is doing." With a bow he turned and descended the stairs.

Herman was thrashing about, tugging and clawing at the wisteria, which, being supple and strong, yielded him no more than a handful of petals. He paused, snorting and sweating, to take a refreshing pull at his bottle. "Hey, you," he yelled at Martha. "Run

down to the kitchen and get me one of them big knives, hear?"

Martha bit her lip. "No, I won't," she said, and then she turned and ran downstairs, fleeing from a torrent of Herman's abuse.

"You're fired too!" he bayed after her. "And you won't get a nickel out of me! Not a red cent!"

Martha was sobbing as she reached her room on the second floor of the palazzo. She wasn't afraid for herself but for the wisteria, for she knew what Herman was capable of. She heard him stamp down the stairs, swearing at every step. He went all the way down to the courtyard, stormed into the kitchen, and emerged with a meat cleaver.

Martha hurried out on one of the little balconies that ringed the courtyard walls. "Oh, don't, Herman, don't!" she called down.

Herman paid no attention. He went over to Lui, and swung the cleaver. The old vine was so thick and strong, however, that the blow had no effect, and in fact the cleaver bounced from Herman's hand and went skittering across the paving stones. Herman cursed, and retrieved it. This time he attacked Lei instead, but with no more success.

"I'll show you damn weeds," Herman bellowed. He stumped up the stairs, stepped out on a balcony, and began hacking away at the tendrils that wound about the iron supports, sending down a litter of petals and shoots. He ducked back inside and reappeared at another balcony, wielding the cleaver. "Herman's going to teach you weeds a lesson, by God," he panted, streaming with sweat.

Martha hurried downstairs, searching for Antonio. She found the old servant in his room, packing his belongings. "Don't worry, Signora," he said when he saw her tear-streaked face. "He can't kill the vines." They could hear Herman grunting and cursing above them. "Whatever he cuts will grow back," said Antonio, but he seemed worried. He and Martha went out to the courtyard. White petals drifted down like snow, and occasionally a length of vine would drop. Herman was concentrating his efforts on Lei.

"He's mutilating her," sobbed Martha. She cried out, "Stop, Herman! Stop!"

But Herman had gone up to the terrace. They couldn't see him, but they could hear him, and shreds of white wisteria continued to fall. "It's horrible," said Martha, trembling. "Can't we do something?"

Antonio spread his hands. "How can I stop him, Signora?" They

listened helplessly to Herman's exclamations of rage, as coils of severed vine came spinning down into the courtyard. Looking up, they saw Herman's round red face glaring down in vindictive triumph. Then he swung back out of sight to continue his assault.

"As long as the roots live, the vines will grow," Antonio said soothingly to Martha. "Remember, they have great strength. They will not die. They are old, as Rome is old, but they will survive. See, Signora? Put your hand there, and you can feel the strength," the old man said, leading Martha over to Lui's ponderous base, thick with gnarled and sinewy twists of ancient growth.

Martha laid her hand on the rough bark. "It's true," she said softly. "I can feel it." The old vine seemed to hum with life, and to move beneath her fingers, as though it were summoning up from deep-sunk roots all its enormous vitality.

Antonio, too, had his hand on the vine. "*Forza, forza,*" he said to it, urging it to resist.

Martha was the first to notice that the descent of Lei's fragments had ceased, and that all was quiet. She looked at Antonio questioningly. "Perhaps he has stopped," Antonio said.

Martha wasn't sure. "He's probably just resting," she said. "He has his chair and his bottle up there. If he drinks enough, he'll fall asleep, but then he'll wake up angry, as he always does, and he'll start in again."

"Perhaps while he is sleeping, we might remove the cleaver," suggested Antonio.

"He'd just find something else."

"We could take all the knives from the kitchen and hide them."

Martha doubted that this would save the vines from Herman's fury, but she went with Antonio into the kitchen, and helped him put the knives into a bag which he took down to the *cantina* and concealed behind some boxes.

Then the two of them mounted the stairs to the terrace, treading cautiously to avoid making noise. Near the top they paused, listening. Martha could hear Herman's raspy, labored breathing. She motioned to Antonio to follow her, and stepped out onto the terrace.

It took them several moments to grasp what had happened.

The terrace was strewn with crumpled white flowers and pieces of vine. The cleaver lay on the pavement beside the chair where Herman, evidently overcome with weariness, had slumped down, taken a drink from his bottle, and fallen asleep.

But he was no longer asleep. He was awake—and his face was darkly mottled, his eyes protruded, and his breath came in wheezing gasps. His hands were clawing feebly at his throat, which was tightly circled by a wisteria tendril bearing lavender buds.

Lui was strangling Herman Beckley.

Martha and Antonio stood staring, unable to move. With each passing second Herman's face darkened and swelled.

Martha took a trembling step forward. Then she hesitated, and glanced back at Antonio.

"You may faint, Signora," Antonio said softly, and Martha closed her eyes, swayed, and lost consciousness.

When she came to, she found that she was lying on her bed. The old servant was dabbing at her temples with a damp cloth.

Martha sat up, shuddering. "What about—the terrace?" she asked. Antonio looked at his watch. "By now, Signora, I am afraid there is little one can do. Should I call a doctor?"

"Yes," said Martha. "Call a doctor." Then she thought of poor Lei, so brutally wounded. "Call a gardener too," she said.

Antonio gravely bowed, and went to the door.

"Call the gardener first," said Martha, and Antonio bowed again.

"Q"

NEXT MONTH . . .

ALL-NEW ISSUE!

14 NEW stories—including

GEORGES SIMENON (about Inspector Maigret)

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JACK RITCHIE (about a beauty contest)

HAROLD Q. MASUR (about Scott Jordan)

THE POE-TIC CORNER

ROCKY CORUM

(With apologies to Edwin Arlington Robinson)

by **GERALD TOMLINSON**

Whenever Rocky Corum lined a hit,
We faithful in the bleachers lauded him.
He was a superstar from cap to mitt,
Hard-sliding, and superlatively grim.

And he was always tough behind the plate,
And he was never brash on post-game shows;
But still he sparkled when he said, "Brut's great!"
And there were hints of grandeur in his pose.

And he was fast—yes, faster than Lou Brock—
With Bench's arm and Stargell's mighty swing;
Two hundred grand a year, and blondes, and stock—
In short, we figured he had everything.

So on we sat, mid popcorn and delight,
And cheered our Braves, and told ump Evers, "Drop dead!"
And Rocky Corum, one four-strikeout night,
Whipped out a gun and filled ump Evers with lead.

"Q"

© 1977 by Gerald Tomlinson.

DETECTIVERSE

WHODUNIT I

by *FREDERICK D. HIGHLAND*

Let's suppose you could hide in a certain ménage
On the farthest west side of Manhattan;
You'd be likely to sniff an exotic potage
And to hear aphoristical Latin
From the lips of a sleuth who's sufficiently plump
From his sampling of Fritz' creole gumbo,
And who waters his plants with the aid of a pump,
Does this vastly intelligent jumbo,
Who expresses his views in a tone full of starch,
That's at odds with his flair orchidaceous,
To a legman-narrator who's certainly Arch
And who might be just slightly mendacious,
And who, you'd surmise, has an eye (which he does)
For a dame or a frail or a doxy,
Though he's quite man enough to stand up to the fuzz
And to stick to a tail like epoxy,
And whom you'd espy in the due course of time,
When returning to make his submission
Of the principal data germane to the crime,
Not excluding the corpse's condition,
And at last you would witness the sleuth earn his fee,
He's so keen, so intent, so resourceful,
To the end that his millionaire client goes free
And the killer's both pent and remorseful;
But alas, sir or ma'am, this ménage you won't find
(Let's assume, for the rhyme, you're a man, sir),
For it has no existence except in the mind
Of the author—you must know the answer,
For it's certain by now you're no longer in doubt,
And it's clear as can be that the author's Rex Stout.

© 1977 by *Frederick D. Highland*.

a **NEW** short story by

E. D. BOYLAN

About two old spinster ladies, Felicity and Louise Cotter, 90 and 87 . . . and when the older one died, only the last of the Cotters could tell the young man from "New England Heritage Magazine" the secret story of their life together . . . the last line will haunt you . . .

THE LAST OF THE COTTERS

by **E. D. BOYLAN**

It was only October but suddenly so windy and wet I could almost feel the icicles forming in my beard, and the other dozen or so persons—most of them elderly—gathered on the slope of that perishing New Hampshire cemetery were all shivering and clutching collars to their ears.

All except Louise Cotter. Standing just behind her, I looked at her profile outlined against the pile of dirt by the open grave and wondered why she didn't seem cold. There wasn't a thing on her head but all that white hair piled up under a wispy mantilla and her coat collar lay flat on her shoulders.

She stood like a statue as the minister's words got blown around everywhere but in our ears and she moved only once to shift her cane from one hand to the other; but she never took her eyes off the flower-decked coffin. Then the prayers were over and the undertaker walked up and asked everybody to please "withdraw from the gravesite."

I said, "Miss Cotter" as she started to turn, then added quickly as a young nephewish-looking guy took her arm, "My name is Harry Dillon—"

"I know," she said.

How could you, lady, unless you're a mind reader?

© 1977 by E. D. Boylan.

"You're from *New England Heritage Magazine*."

She was a mind reader. And so was I; the nephewish-looking guy said, "My aunt should get to her car. Please don't keep her standing in the cold."

"I wouldn't dream of it." I glared at him and took her other arm. We began to move across the hard brown slope and I went on, ignoring him, "I know it's a difficult day, ma'am. It's not easy, losing a sister. But do you mind my asking—how did you know my name and my job?"

She was leaning a nice friendly weight on my arm and I noticed with satisfaction that it was the cane, not the nephew, which took the other side's weight.

She said, "I know your name because you gave it to my maid on the phone. I know your job because I made inquiries. I know what you want and I'll give it to you—on one condition. Alec, where's Susan?"

This last was addressed to the nephew. He looked over his shoulder and said, "Getting the car. I knew you'd probably want—"

"Give her my love and thank her for coming. When is your plane?"

"Not till—"

"I've arranged with the Howard Johnson's on Route Six to have lunch for you all. There's a room reserved, please tell the others. I'm going home."

"But, Aunt Louise—"

"Alec, the poor old things will perish if you don't get them out of this wind. Mr. Dillon, will you drive me home?"

I pressed her arm happily as the nephew made one more attempt at a full sentence, gave it up, and walked away. I said, "My car's that old red sedan, but the heater works fine."

"Thank God." She laughed a little and I began falling in love with her during the twenty-odd steps it took us to get to my heap. I tucked Miss Louise into the front seat and ran around to the driver's side. The gravesite was being abandoned fast and we were the last car to pull away.

Well, a ninety-year-old spinster can't be expected to have many mourners—but she had one. That one leaned forward on the seat beside me straining for a last glimpse of the blur of flowers that broke the brown hillside. There were tears on her face; no longer the cool, pretty, spry old lady—now she was a grieving woman.

Then she dabbed at her eyes and spoke the words which sealed my love, "The Minute Man Inn is just down the road. Will you buy me a Bloody Mary?"

I wanted to hug her, but I just patted her hand wondering if she really knew what I wanted. And if she did, why was she so calm, so accepting, so—resigned? Meanwhile I was bearing down on the Minute Man Inn saying, "I happen to be staying there, and if it didn't sound, as my Irish grandmother used to say, 'indaycent,' I'd invite you to have your drink with your feet comfortably up in Room Fourteen."

"And if I didn't know that they always have a roaring fire in the Tap Room, I'd accept instantly."

The Minute Man Inn is a pleasant old hostelry just off Route 119 in Rindge, New Hampshire, with a magnificent view of Mt. Monadnock. Its Tap Room door is, sensibly, the first one to be reached from the parking area. The wind was a chilling blast as I held the door against it and Miss Cotter's ninety-odd pounds practically blew past me and headed, shivering, for the fire.

She held her white paper-thin hands to the flames and I vow I could see the glow through them. I started to take her coat but she said, "I'll wear it for a while. I'm frozen. Tell him no tabasco in mine."

I walked to the bar wondering how, once we had settled down, thawed out, and sipped a bit, I would ask the question which had brought me up from Boston. Despite her equanimity I hesitated to say, "Tell me, dear lady, are you possibly a murderess or the perpetrator of a fraud?—and please pass the pretzels."

I needn't have worried. Miss Cotter took a sip of her drink, sighed appreciatively, and leaned back in the big shabby chair that I had drawn up to the blaze for her. She said, "Thank you. This is heavenly. Much nicer than sitting in that Howard Johnson's with the last few Cotters—whom I hardly know anyway." She lifted her glass, her eyes on mine. "And here's wishing eternal rest to the dear dead soul. Whoever she is."

It was out. I said to myself: don't blow it, don't start asking gentle probing questions. She'll talk. She wants to. I merely nodded, returning her gaze.

She went on, "I was very fond of her. We had a happy companionable life for—good Lord, how many years? . . . Do you know how old I am?"

"The article said you were born in 1887."

"Article?" She looked mystified, then smiled. "Of course. In your illustrious magazine. I can't remember who asked me if they could write that. Was it you?"

"No. I wasn't with *New England Heritage Magazine* at the time. I only read the piece about a month ago, in a back issue."

"And you spotted the giveaway line."

"It was only a giveaway to me. You see, I was brought up on our family story of an Irish great-aunt from Galway named Maura Dillon—nicknamed 'Cherry' because of her flaming red hair—who went to America on her honeymoon in 1907 and is supposed to have died there."

Miss Cotter sipped her drink and said nothing and I went on, "I say 'supposed to have died' because her family never heard any further from her husband, a man named McCaffrey whom they didn't like, beyond the one letter saying that Maura—he never called her Cherry—was dead. No word about how or where. When her oldest brother, my grandfather, came to Boston three years later, he found that McCaffrey had just died. No doubt about the details there. He'd been the most notorious drunk in his neighborhood."

"So naturally"—Miss Cotter was staring into the red depths of her drink—"your grandfather made inquiries into the death of his sister."

"Naturally. But none of the neighbors even knew McCaffrey had been married. When he'd moved into that room over the pub in South Boston he'd been alone. Nobody remembered his ever mentioning a wife."

"And there was no death certificate on record"—Miss Cotter sat forward and began to shrug out of her coat—"and it was your family's opinion that poor auntie had either met with foul play or had run away from her brute of a husband. And she was never traced. It's a grand story."

"But it needs an ending." I signaled to the bartender for another round.

"An ending might spoil it." She smiled at me. "Wouldn't it be better to imagine all sorts of pleasant alternatives—nice things that could have happened to the scared little bride from Galway? She might have escaped, say, to the west, taken up with a kindly millionaire who is making her happy perhaps to this day. Wouldn't that be better than merely supposing she is in her grave?"

"Not if it's a peaceful grave at the foot of a mountain."

She was silent for a minute, then repeated softly, "A peaceful grave at the foot of a mountain . . . Yes, that could be a good ending to any story. Oh, look, it's snowing."

I'd already noticed the big wet flakes blurring the windows and darkening the sky. The bartender put fresh drinks on the table between us. Miss Cotter said, "You're spoiling me."

Her voice had an absent quality now. I said nothing more and she went on after a moment, "Well, my story doesn't have any honeymoons, happy or unhappy. The Cotter sisters were spinsters. There'd been a half brother, years older, but he'd married and died before Felicity and Louise were in their teens. The girls were motherless and, to all intents and purposes, fatherless. Benjamin Cotter was utterly absorbed in his painting. Louise and Felicity had few friends and no beaux. Quite a pathetic pair."

She had lapsed, it seemed unconsciously, into a narrative style, as if the events of her distant lonely girlhood had happened to some other helpless young person totally unlike the self-possessed lady who now recounted them.

"When Felicity turned twenty-one and Louise eighteen it occurred to their father to send them to Europe on the usual Grand Tour. That was in 1907."

She gazed at me over her glass and I gazed back, holding my breath.

"Benjamin Cotter's work was beginning to be recognized by then. The summer before, he had finished the series of paintings of small New Hampshire towns that were to make him such a reputation." She paused and smiled slightly. "Such a reputation, in fact, that seventy years later your magazine would write about him as a distinguished native artist and request the memoirs of his daughters, two elderly ladies living in Rindge."

"But one of them," I put in quietly, "Felicity by name, was ailing and unable to contribute much. It was Miss Louise"—I held up my glass to her—"still active and keen at eighty-seven, who supplied so much of the color and detail of her father's early life."

"You sound like the blurb on the jacket of a biography."

I laughed aloud, blew her a kiss, and lit a cigarette. What a day! I wished it would never end. I wanted to sit there forever, always on the brink of my discovery.

"Back to the year 1907," I said, "and the Cotter sisters' Grand Tour of Europe."

"It was while they were in London that word came their father had died." She seemed to have forgotten her drink and the glass was clasped loosely in her hand as she stared at the fire. "By the time it reached them, the lawyer's letter was two weeks old and it urged them, most kindly, not to return home. The nice old attorney pointed out that by now Cotter would be buried and the girls might as well continue the trip as planned.

"Then he outlined the terms of the will: Cotter's money—not a very great deal—was to be divided between his two daughters; his house in Rindge was left to his younger daughter, Louise; his paintings were left to his older daughter, Felicity, to sell or keep as she saw fit, and any that remained in the family after her death were to be given to his home state of New Hampshire—'and here,' the letter said, 'your father added with characteristic modesty, for what they are worth.'"

For what they are worth. Miss Cotter spoke the words with dry composure. I gagged silently, thinking of their enormous worth today. Then I said, "Did you continue the trip?"

She nodded. "To Switzerland, as scheduled. And there, one month later, Felicity died of pneumonia. I have the death certificate. I swear to you that Felicity died of pneumonia."

"I believe you, Miss Cotter."

It was beginning to be less fun. Her face had turned somber and her hands trembled. I was afraid she'd tumble the drink into her lap, so I reached over and took it from her. She seemed not to notice and went on to describe how the bereft and frightened Louise had returned to Boston without notifying anyone of Felicity's death—who was there to notify?—and had gone straight to the Parker House Hotel. It was while she was lying on the bed with a cold compress on her aching head that a pretty red-haired maid had walked in and asked if she needed more towels.

"Her name"—Miss Cotter looked full at me—"was Maura Dillon McCaffrey."

There. But why did I feel suddenly so hollow? Are mysteries best left unsolved after all?

Miss Cotter talked on and I listened with sadness. The little maid was sorry about the lady's headache. She'd lost a sister? Ah, 'twas a terrible sorrow. Her own dear sisters were far away in the old country and she herself in flight from a drunken husband. Never would she go back to him, never. As soon as she'd made enough dollars she'd—she'd—ah, dear God, what *would* she do? A

girl alone in a strange country, too proud to go back to her people who had warned her against this man.

And as Maura McCaffrey sobbed, Louise Cotter thought about her father's money and the chill qualifying line in the lawyer's letter—"not a very great deal"—and about his paintings and the remarks she'd heard about how they'd be valuable someday, and about her need to inherit the paintings . . . and the bargain was struck.

I said, "How did you manage it so successfully? There must have been people in New Hampshire who knew you?"

"We went to Santa Fe. The old Rindge house was sold and we lived in Santa Fe till 1945. Don't you remember the article—the part that must have tipped you off?"

Of course. I recalled the small jolt of recognition, the stirring of memory I'd felt on reading those few wistful lines. A well-known New Hampshire writer who'd been a student in Santa Fe during the twenties had done some gardening for the Cotter sisters. Asked for his recollections of them, he'd described how they would give him lemonade and cookies in their cool little parlor and how he had admired their father's beautiful painting of Lake Sunapee which hung over the piano. He'd said it made him homesick for New Hampshire and one of the sisters—he couldn't remember which—had said it made her homesick too, but because it reminded her of Galway Bay. Later he'd noticed a faint penciled title at the base of the picture—*Cherry's Bay*—and had meant to ask what it meant.

A chance remark uttered 50 years ago and dredged from the memory of someone trying to give an interesting interview—it caught my eye and nudged my mind. A phone call from Boston, a trip to a funeral, and now I knew—and almost wished I didn't.

Miss Cotter stood up. "I must go home. It will be lonely, but I have good memories."

I helped her into her coat and we walked together to the car. The early wet October snow enveloped us. She said, "Could we drive past her grave once more? It's only a minute out of our way."

Heading back as we'd come, I said, "It took a lot of nerve. First to do it at all. Then all those years . . . You're quite a woman."

She said slowly, "Well . . . she was terribly afraid at first, but I knew it would work. And it wasn't really dishonest. The paintings have been well cared for and will go to the state now. We only

had to sell a few, just enough to be comfortable. Neither of us was greedy or extravagant."

"I still say"—we were nearing the cemetery now—"that it took nerve and brains."

"We Dillons have never lacked for either, nephew."

It took about five seconds for her words to reach my mind.

Then my foot lifted itself from the gas pedal and my hands directed the steering wheel toward a side lane. As the car stopped I opened my mouth and got these words out:

"You mean . . . there was . . . another switch?"

"Yes, there had to be. Poor Louise simply didn't have the courage to see it through. During the years in Santa Fe she grew peculiar, brooded about Felicity, began to imagine that she *was* Felicity. So I just let her believe it. It was simpler. Oh, I was much better equipped. We Dillons were always a spunky lot. By the way"—she looked at me sternly—"I've told you all this in absolute confidence. Promise me you'll respect that."

I stared at the woman who was telling me she was my aunt. It simply couldn't be. It wasn't possible. Cars whizzed by in the gathering gloom of the snow and I felt like a figure glued inside a glass ball which someone has just shaken starting a miniature raging blizzard about me. This *had* to be Louise Cotter sitting beside me. It *had* to be.

I said, "Louise Cotter, who is in that grave?"

She replied, "I am."

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THE DROWNING ICECUBE

by **JON L. BREEN**

The Atcherley house sprawled over the hilly terrain high above San Ernesto Beach like a lost playing-card box, festively empty. As the distant ocean ran to hide in a womb of fog, I tried to calculate how many feet of view from this distance equaled how many thousand dollars in price tag.

The door swung open and a hand-held movie camera buzzed around my face like a mutated mosquito. It was followed by a man with a gray crewcut who waved an ice-filled glass at me in welcome. He didn't seem to notice the camera or the long-haired and shaggy-bearded youth who operated it.

"You must be Hugh Larcher. Come in," he said. I followed him

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to a well-stocked bar like a giant's medicine chest and looked thoughtfully at the bottles. "I'm Conrad Atcherley. I'd offer you a drink, but I think I've had enough."

I understood him. He motioned me to a chair that looked like a misshapen wastebasket and felt like a petrified beanbag.

"You good on runaways?" he asked.

"We're all runaways," I replied.

"Yeah, I guess so. I ran away from my wife's father's business the week before he went bankrupt. He ran away and we haven't seen him since. You're right—we're all runaways."

He decided to make himself another drink. He still didn't offer me one, but he was preoccupied. His hand shook like someone digging up the street with a jackhammer.

"She never forgave me. She never will." He took a swallow like a drowning man gulping for life. "It's my son. He's gone."

"How long?"

"A week. Two weeks. I don't know exactly. I'm not worried, but Millicent, my wife, thought I should call somebody."

I felt like the guy on "Candid Camera" who's in on the gag. I gestured toward the hand-held camera and the mike boom above our heads.

"Oh, that," he said. "Don't let them bother you. Public TV's doing a documentary on our family. We hardly notice them any more."

A girl of about 16 strolled into the room eating an apple. She seemed to notice the camera, looking into it and eating slowly and sloppily like a character in *Tom Jones*. To my relief the camera and microphone followed her out of the room.

"My daughter Kelso," Atcherley said.

"Unusual name."

"My wife named her. After a horse." He waved his drink apologetically. "I'd offer you a drink, you understand, but if I drink any more I'll be too smashed to tell you what you need to know."

"Nobody's ever told me what I need to know, but I do understand. About your son—is he older or younger than your daughter?"

"He's twenty-seven, eleven years older."

"What's his name? Citation?"

Conrad Atcherley started a grin, but it stopped like a rained-out barbecue when a female voice said, "That's very funny, Mr.

Larcher. Are you one of these wisecracking private eyes?"

"I've been trying to give it up," I told her.

Millicent Atcherley strolled into the room, tall, slim, regal, and cool as an iceberg. Now I knew why Atcherley reminded me of the *Titanic*.

She poured a drink as tall and cool as she was. "I'd offer you a drink, Mr. Larcher, but I'm sure you don't drink when you're working," she said, throwing a meaningful glance at her husband. Waves of tension leaped back and forth between them, like CB signals lost in stormclouds. They were like two fishermen with the same rotten old shoe caught between their lines.

"I could stand a glass of water," I said.

She laughed with a touch of hysteria, and he turned his back on us and walked to the open door, as if obeying an inner clock. Like a kid at the old swimming hole who didn't know how to swim, he began hurling icecubes into the fogbound view.

"I guess it's left to me," she said. "Mr. Larcher, I want very badly for you to find my son."

Thinking if I didn't get some details soon, they might start dinner on me, I asked, "Tell me about him. What's his name to begin with?"

"Stuyvesant Marcus Atcherley. But we call him Stymie usually."

Stymie. Another racehorse.

"Isn't he a little old still to be living at home?"

"He had an unhappy marriage and is just starting to regroup. He was making real progress, Mr. Larcher."

"He's divorced?"

"No," she said. "Widowed. Just as well. She was no good for him."

"How long ago?"

"Six months. We insisted he come home to us for a while, not to try to do anything on his own just yet. He wasn't ready."

"Maybe now he's ready."

She shook her head, unaccepting. "No, not quite. It isn't like him to just leave like this, without some cruel gesture. He's left home twice before, once to go to college and once to get married, and each time he destroyed something. When he ran off to get married, it was two place settings of my Secretariat China. The first time, it was a plaster bust of my father, broken into a million pieces."

"Was that before or after your father's business went bankrupt?"

"So you know about that. Well, let's see, it was eight years ago, and father's business and our marriage went down the tubes together nine years ago—no, it was eight, that's right, eight. It was in August, no, early September, just before school started. It was—why, I believe it was the same day. Yes, I'm not sure, but I think so."

"Your son left, your marriage and your father's business and your father's bust all went bust the same day, and you're not sure?"

She laughed like ice tinkling and got up to pour herself another drink. "Our family has led a most *eventful* life, Mr. Larcher. We are just an average family, as the public television people will assure you, and that was just an average day."

Atcherley had thrown the last of his icecubes and returned to the bar. The couple stared unseeingly at each other like lost gophers in a cabbage patch.

"What does your son do?" I asked.

It stumped her. "Do?"

"For a living, I mean."

"Isn't being a son enough?"

"The career prospects are limited," I replied. I left them there looking at each other like cigar-store Indians on the warpath and started down the walk to my car. For some reason I was thirsty.

Kelso Atcherley intercepted me on the way.

"Mr. Larcher, I have to tell you something. But it's a secret. No one else must know."

I raised an eyebrow at the mike-boom swaying above her moist lips and the hand-held camera close enough to her mouth to be doing a training film for dentists. They meant nothing to her.

"All right," I said. "Want a ride into San Ernesto?"

She rolled her eyes at the camera. "Wow! I guess I've heard that one before."

I didn't press the point. I don't play ping-pong with children. "What is it you want to tell me, Kelso?"

"My grandfather is in San Ernesto. My parents don't know it. He's grown a beard and he tends bar at Cooky's, at the bottom of the hill. I think my brother Stymie went there to see him. I think they want some kind of revenge on my father."

"Thanks, Kelso. You're a good girl."

"Would you like an apple?"

"Best offer I've had all morning, but I have promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep."

She giggled. "That's a poem. What made you think of that?"

"That frost on your mother's pumpkin. Have a nice day, honey."

I jumped in my car and started wheeling down the long road to the Atcherley front gate. I noticed there was a guy running after me, waving a piece of paper. Probably the director of the public TV documentary with a release for me to sign.

Pulling into the parking lot at Cooky's, I thought of all the people who wish life had releases for them to sign.

Cooky's was a neighborhood bar lost in somebody else's neighborhood. A harassed-looking youth, pale for a beach town, was tending bar with the cool deliberation of an inexperienced bobsledder.

When business tapered off, I ordered a drink. He looked as if he wanted to refuse me as the Atcherleys had but couldn't think of a reason.

"You're not the regular bartender," I observed.

"You been in here before?" he asked. "I've never seen you."

"A couple of times. An old geezer with a beard was tending bar those times. Where is he today?"

"I wish I knew. I'm the owner. He didn't show up."

"Are you Cooky?" I asked.

His glance fell to the bar surface like a chopped-down tree that should have lived, a murdered tree like a broken memory.

"Cooky was a lady, mister. Cooky is dead."

"When did she die?"

"Six months ago. The people on the hill killed her."

"The Atcherleys?"

"Yeah, the Atcherleys. Who else would I mean when I said the people on the hill?"

"Lots of people live up there."

"But the rest of them don't spend all their free time spitting on the town of San Ernesto."

"Cooky was married to Stymie Atcherley?"

"You know a lot about it."

"Just a lucky guess. Have you seen Stymie Atcherley lately?"

"If he's still alive, I haven't seen him. All the Atcherleys know how to do is destroy things."

"Did you buy the place from Cooky before she died?"

"We always owned it jointly, inherited it from our father. Cooky was my sister."

"Any others in your family?"

"One. He went to Hollywood to be a movie director."

"Successful at it?"

"Anybody who gets out of San Ernesto in our family is successful, mister. Oh, he does all right. Does documentaries for public television."

"Seen him lately?"

"He's never come back. Can't think why he would unless it was to kill all the Atcherleys. And if he did that, I hope he'd ask me to help him."

"This bartender of yours. Is he usually on time?"

"Old Gilly! Never been late yet. I can't understand it."

"Did you know Mrs. Atcherley's father?"

"Sure, everybody in this town knew Brandon Marcus—his racing stable was the most successful on the West Coast at one time, and Marcus Munitions built this town."

"Marcus Munitions?"

"Sure, it went bust about seven or eight years ago, and he disappeared."

"What kind of munitions did he make?"

"He patented the first oil-shooting gun for seal and seagull hunters, but for some reason all the environmentalists got het up about it. Ruined him, poor guy."

I finished my drink and asked for another.

"Drowning your sorrows?" he said.

"Sorrows are a hard thing to drown. Joys drown easier."

"Yeah, that's for sure."

"Does this Gilly read the *Racing Form* much?"

"Yeah, just reads it though, never bets. Funny thing."

"Funny," I said.

I walked out of Cooky's to the parking lot and looked up the hill toward the Atcherley house. On a direct line. Then on a hunch I started up the hill, feeling like a man trying Mt. Everest when slightly drunk. But I didn't have to reach the summit to find what I was looking for, or to find what was looking for me.

The corpse had a shaggy beard. He'd been dead no more than 45 minutes, could easily have died about the time Atcherley was slinging icecubes out the window. But the weapon that beat the old man's brains in packed more wallop than an icecube no mat-

ter who was throwing it. And from the house Atcherley couldn't possibly have seen anyone to aim at this far down. Still, the murder and the icecubes seemed connected, like the whole population of San Ernesto held together in an ice sculpture of greed and revenge.

When I brought the town cop, Bob Hooper, back to the scene, I was like the talk show guest who starts interviewing the host. Luckily he didn't carry his brain in his beer belly and he was willing to share information.

"Mister, something stinks in San Ernesto, and it's not the red tide. Anything I can do to make this a good place to live again, I'll do."

"How did Cooky Atcherley die?" I asked.

"Drowned in oil."

"Murder?"

"I thought so. It looked like one of those Marcus Oil Guns did the job. We couldn't prove anything, though."

"You had a suspect?"

"Well, Mrs. Atcherley had one of the oil guns on constant display in their house. She'd had it there ever since old Marcus went bust and disappeared. A dozen people saw it there. The day after Cooky Atcherley died, it was gone and nobody has seen it since. You can draw your own conclusions."

I motioned to where the body lay. There was a little hole half dug next to it, like a tentative try for China. There was no shovel.

"Looks like the old man was digging a hole."

"Yeah. I guess the least we can do is finish it for him."

Before we got to China, we got to the Marcus Oil Gun. The state of the soil suggested the old man was digging it up, not burying it.

"The way I figure it," I said, "the murderer followed old Gilly, who was really Bradford Marcus, up here and saw him digging where the oil gun was buried. When the icecubes started to cascade down the hill, Marcus looked up and saw the person watching him. The murderer, who might have let Marcus live otherwise, had no choice but to brain him with the shovel. Then he took the shovel away with him."

"Why didn't he dig up the weapon?"

"No time. He had to get somewhere else in a hurry. He didn't think anybody'd find the body, and he could come back later to dig up the evidence."

"But who was it?"

"I'll let you know if I figure it out," I said, and started back downhill to the main street of San Ernesto.

When I pulled back in the drive of the Atcherley place, the TV director waved the release in my face, like an unused leaf from an outdated calendar.

I signed it quickly and looked him in the eye. He was bearded and longhaired like his cameraman, but I saw something in his eyes that looked familiar, like a fake Renoir in a ruined gallery.

"Cooky was your sister?"

That stopped him. "How'd you know?"

"You should have told your brother you're in town."

"What brother? I don't have a brother—Cooky was the only other child in my family. I could tell you the truth, that my being here is just a coincidence, an assignment from my network, but I doubt that you'd believe me."

"I believe you," I said.

He wasn't used to being believed, an occupational hazard. "Are you working for the Atcherleys?" he asked. I get all the tough questions.

"I started out to, but now I'm not sure. I guess I'm working for justice. I guess I'm working for truth."

"Well, I'm working for bread, man, and I'll appreciate it if you don't blow my cover."

I felt a cool breeze from the ocean, like a fan blowing everybody's cover. I looked out at the beach below, an ecological infant born again out of a fog of deceit, and I added, "And I guess I'm working for beauty too."

As Conrad Atcherley let me into the house, the camera and the mike-boom caught up with me again. The director hovered in the rear, not expecting to take part in the action.

"I'd offer you a drink—" Atcherley began, like an overrehearsed actor longing for new lines to learn.

"I'm not thirsty for anything but the truth," I said.

"I'll help you all I can."

"Good. When you threw those icecubes this morning, who were you signaling?"

"Signaling?"

"Were you signaling your son? Was he waiting down there in the bushes?"

"I don't know where my son is."

"Was he waiting there until it was time for the bar to open? And is that why you were signaling him, because it was time to open the bar? Did he ask you to do that because you both knew old Gilly wouldn't be there to tend bar today?"

"But he didn't know Gilly wouldn't be there—" Atcherley started, then broke off suddenly like the waves on the rocks below.

The director walked reluctantly onto his own sound stage, like a fly drawn to a spider web. "What is all this about?" he asked, as if not sure he wanted to know, weighing the merits of darkness and light with a mixture of professional interest and emotional involvement.

"Young Stymie Atcherley is down there at Cooky's bar pretending to be his dead wife's brother, and your brother, the brother you don't have. I suppose Stymie wore a beard, Mr. Atcherley?"

"Uh, yes, a full beard."

"Well, the kid down at the bar has a white face, the look of a guy who never gets the sun. Probably he shaved off his beard to disguise himself. When Cooky died, he must have started occupying the bar as an absentee landlord, claiming to be her brother. Then two things happened: her real brother showed up to do this documentary for public TV—when was that, Mr. Atcherley?"

"Two weeks ago," said the voice of Millicent Atcherley from the doorway. "They started making the film the very day Stymie disappeared. We never thought there was a connection."

The director asked, "How did he figure out it was me?"

I said, "Probably you and his wife had a family resemblance around the eyes. I don't know. But that same day he discovered that old Gilly was his grandfather. It must have been quite a shock to him. You knew all this, didn't you, Mr. Atcherley?"

"Yes, yes," he said, clutching his drink like the Teddy Bear of his lost youth. "The boy and I were very close. I didn't want you meddling in this."

"Did you and he plot the murder of old Gilly, your father-in-law?"

"No, I tell you I had no reason to kill him. He had nothing on me. I was just smart enough to get out at the right time. And my son admired his grandfather, thought he got a raw deal from the environmentalists. By the way, I didn't signal to my son when I threw those icecubes."

"Then who were you signaling to?"

"The squirrels. I was warning the squirrels. Kelso was after them with her oil gun again."

"Kelso has an oil gun?"

"The prototype model. She uses it just to torment me. I got out of Marcus Munitions because I love animals—the fact that I made a couple of million dollars on the deal was only incidental. You must believe that. All this wealth sickens me. All I ever wanted to do was run an animal shelter. I was born to be a zookeeper."

He raised the glass to his lips and the icecubes clinked together like all the clanging doors of all the cages in all the lost zoos of memory. I turned to Mrs. Atcherley.

"That's why you buried the oil gun, Mrs. Atcherley?"

"What? What did you say?"

"You buried your oil gun trophy so the police would suspect it was that weapon that killed Cooky, your son's wife. So that they would never think to look for another oil gun. So that you could protect your daughter from the police. You wanted to protect her, and you wanted to protect Stymie from the woman he married."

All the coldness had melted from her features, and the whole San Ernesto ice sculpture became a puddle in the bottom of her glass. I understood her, I pitied her, and for the first time I liked her.

"I was just being a mother. What else could a mother do?"

"Your child is a monster," the director said. "She killed my sister. She squirts oil all over the gulls and seals and squirrels. She's a monster." I could see his point of view too, and I liked him for it.

"Our daughter was not a monster," said Atcherley, putting an arm around his wife's shoulders. "She was not. She killed the man who made the evil oil gun that had made her do such bad things. She killed him with a shovel. She told me. She was a good girl at heart."

We all understood the significance of that word "was." It was a past tense, like all the past tenses that polish the broken shards of memory. The water looked clear in the ocean off San Ernesto as it carried the body out to sea.

I told Hooper, the town cop, I didn't want to answer questions. We had all achieved a common ending, and the questions hung loosely over the side like falling sailors at the edge of the world. But he insisted, so I answered as best I could.

"You never saw Cooky. How'd you recognize her brother by his eyes?"

"What I saw was a resemblance to both the Atcherley kids. That got me to thinking that Cooky and her brother were probably the illegitimate children of Bradford Marcus."

"Oh." He scratched his head. It was perfectly clear to me. "Well, how did Kelso get down the hill so fast to kill her grandfather and back up again to talk to you?"

"Does your TV get UHF?"

"Sure, they all do now."

"I think you can see the answer to that on public TV in a few months. Probably the camera crew helped her, lowered her down on the mike-boom."

"Wait a minute. Were they all illegitimate sons of Marcus too?"

"I doubt it. But they were animal lovers, did a lot of animal documentaries. They probably saw Kelso shooting at squirrels with the oil gun, objected, and got the whole story out of her, then agreed to help her kill her grandfather."

"But how did she know it was her grandfather?"

"You forgot—she told me. She knew it all along."

"But why did she tell you?"

"So I'd find the body and suspect her father of signaling someone with the icecubes."

The town cop's hand was shaking. "Now, look, Mr. Larcher. I just want you to take it slow and explain this whole thing to me." He took out a sheet of graph paper and a pencil. "You just tell me all about it, and I'm going to make me a little chart of who knew what and who was related to who and how and when and where everybody was when what happened happened and everything. I know I can understand this. After all, I'm a cop. Just please explain it all to me a little slower, huh?"

I couldn't make him understand, clear as it all was to me, and I know anybody reading this will sympathize with my frustration, seeing how simple it all was. Hours later, watching the sun disappearing in the calm Pacific and the lights of San Ernesto glittering like forgotten stars on a cloudless night, I put my hand on his shoulder and asked him if he was really cut out for police work.

"I know some people who are starting a private zoo and racing stable not far from here, and I'm sure they could use a good security man."

"We could all use a good security man," he replied, tossing his wadded graph paper into the blanket of night like a lost icecube.

a LEW ARCHER novelet by

ROSS MACDONALD

The "accident" took place in Room 13 of the Siesta Motel. Private detective Lew Archer, the moody manhunter, was sleeping in Room 14. The juxtaposition of rooms started a hard, tough investigation that led to an "iron finger" and to a small, old, weary man called Angel. . .

GONE GIRL

by ROSS MACDONALD

It was a Friday night. I was tooling home from the Mexican border in a light blue convertible and a dark blue mood. I had followed a man from Fresno to San Diego and lost him in the maze of streets in Old Town. When I picked up his trail again, it was cold. He had crossed the border, and my instructions went no farther than the United States.

Halfway home, just above Emerald Bay, I overtook the worst driver in the world. He was driving a black fishtail Cadillac as if he were tacking a sailboat. The heavy car wove back and forth across the freeway, using two of its four lanes, and sometimes three. It was late, and I was in a hurry to get some sleep. I started to pass it on the right, at a time when it was riding the double line. The Cadillac drifted toward me like an unguided missile, and forced me off the road in a screeching skid.

I speeded up to pass on the left. Simultaneously, the driver of the Cadillac accelerated. My acceleration couldn't match his. We raced neck and neck down the middle of the road. I wondered if he was drunk or crazy or afraid of me. Then the freeway ended. I was doing 80 on the wrong side of a two-lane highway, and a truck came over a rise ahead like a blazing double comet. I floor-boarded the gas pedal and cut over sharply to the right, threatening the Cadillac's fenders and its driver's life. In the approaching

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headlights his face was as blank and white as a piece of paper, with charred black holes for eyes. His shoulders were naked.

At the last possible second he slowed enough to let me get by. The truck went off onto the shoulder, honking angrily. I braked gradually, hoping to force the Cadillac to stop. It looped past me in an insane arc, tires skittering, and was sucked away into darkness.

When I finally came to a full stop, I had to pry my fingers off the wheel. My knees were remote and watery. After smoking part of a cigarette, I U-turned and drove very cautiously back to Emerald Bay. I was long past the hot-rod age, and I needed rest.

The first motel I came to, the Siesta, was decorated with a vacancy sign and a neon Mexican sleeping luminously under a sombrero. Envyng him, I parked on the gravel apron in front of the motel office. There was a light inside. The glass-paned door was standing open, and I went in. The little room was pleasantly furnished with rattan and chintz. I jangled the bell on the desk a few times. No one appeared, so I sat down to wait and lit a cigarette. An electric clock on the wall said a quarter to one.

I must have dozed for a few minutes. A dream rushed by the threshold of my consciousness, making a gentle noise. Death was in the dream. He drove a black Cadillac loaded with flowers. When I woke up, the cigarette was starting to burn my fingers. A thin man in a gray flannel shirt was standing over me with a doubtful look on his face.

He was big-nosed and small-chinned, and he wasn't as young as he gave the impression of being. His teeth were bad, the sandy hair was thinning and receding. He was the typical old youth who scrounged and wheedled his living around motor courts and restaurants and hotels, and hung on desperately to the frayed edges of other people's lives.

"What do you want?" he said. "Who are you? What do you want?" His voice was reedy and changeable like an adolescent's.

"A room."

"Is that all you want?"

From where I sat, it sounded like an accusation. I let it pass. "What else is there? Circassian dancing girls? Free popcorn?"

He tried to smile without showing his bad teeth. The smile was a dismal failure, like my joke. "I'm sorry, sir," he said. "You woke me up. I never make much sense right after I just wake up."

"Have a nightmare?"

His vague eyes expanded like blue bubblegum bubbles. "Why did you ask me that?"

"Because I just had one. But skip it. Do you have a vacancy or don't you?"

"Yessir. Sorry, sir." He swallowed whatever bitter taste he had in his mouth, and assumed an impersonal obsequious manner. "You got any luggage, sir?"

"No luggage."

Moving silently in tennis sneakers like a frail ghost of the boy he once had been, he went behind the counter, and took my name, address, license number, and ten dollars. In return, he gave me a key numbered 14 and told me where to use it. Apparently he despaired of a tip.

Room 14 was like any other middle-class motel room touched with the California-Spanish mania. Artificially roughened plaster painted adobe color, poinsettia-red curtains, imitation parchment lampshade on a twisted black iron stand. A Rivera reproduction of a sleeping Mexican hung on the wall over the bed. I succumbed to its suggestion right away, and dreamed about Circassian dancing girls.

Along toward morning one of them got frightened, through no fault of mine, and began to scream her little Circassian lungs out. I sat up in bed, making soothing noises, and woke up. It was nearly nine by my wristwatch. The screaming ceased and began again, spoiling the morning like a fire siren outside the window. I pulled on my trousers over the underwear I'd been sleeping in, and went outside.

A young woman was standing on the walk outside the next room. She had a key in one hand and a handful of blood in the other. She wore a wide multicolored skirt and a low-cut gypsy sort of blouse. The blouse was distended and her mouth was open, and she was yelling her head off. It was a fine dark head, but I hated her for spoiling my morning sleep.

I took her by the shoulders and said, "Stop it."

The screaming stopped. She looked down sleepily at the blood on her hand. It was as thick as axle grease, and almost as dark in color.

"Where did you get that?"

"I slipped and fell in it. I didn't see it."

Dropping the key on the walk, she pulled her skirt to one side with her clean hand. Her legs were bare and brown. Her skirt

was stained at the back with the same thick fluid.

"Where? In this room?"

She faltered. "Yes."

Doors were opening up and down the drive. Half a dozen people began to converge on us. A dark-faced man about four and a half feet high came scampering from the direction of the office, his little pointed shoes dancing in the gravel.

"Come inside and show me," I said to the girl.

"I can't. I won't." Her eyes were very heavy, and surrounded by the bluish pallor of shock.

The little man slid to a stop between us, reached up, and gripped the upper part of her arm. "What is the matter, Ella? Are you crazy, disturbing the guests?"

She said, "Blood," and leaned against me with her eyes closed.

His sharp glance probed the situation. He turned to the other guests, who had formed a murmuring semicircle around us.

"It is perfectly okay. Do not be concerned, ladies and gentlemen. My daughter cut herself a little bit. It is perfectly all right."

Circling her waist with one long arm, he hustled her through the open door and slammed it behind him. I caught it on my foot and followed them in.

The room was a duplicate of mine, including the reproduction over the unmade bed, but everything was reversed as in a mirror image. The girl took a few weak steps by herself and sat on the edge of the bed. Then she noticed the blood spots on the sheets. She stood up quickly. Her mouth opened, rimmed with white teeth.

"Don't do it," I said. "We know you have a very fine pair of lungs."

The little man turned on me. "Who do you think you are?"

"The name is Archer. I have the next room."

"Get out of this one, please."

"I don't think I will."

He lowered his greased black head as if he were going to butt me. Under his sharkskin jacket a hunch protruded from his back like a displaced elbow. He seemed to reconsider the butting gambit and decided in favor of diplomacy.

"You are jumping to conclusions, mister. It is not so serious as it looks. We had a little accident here last night."

"Sure, your daughter cut herself. She heals remarkably fast."

"Nothing like that." He fluttered one long hand. "I said to the

people outside the first thing that came to my mind. Actually, it was a little scuffle. One of the guests suffered a nosebleed."

The girl moved like a sleepwalker to the bathroom door and switched on the light. There was a pool of blood coagulating on the black and white checkerboard linoleum, streaked where she had slipped and fallen in it.

"Some nosebleed," I said to the little man. "Do you run this joint?"

"I am the proprietor of the Siesta motor hotel, yes. My name is Salanda. The gentleman is susceptible to nosebleed. He told me so himself."

"Where is he now?"

"He checked out early this morning."

"In good health?"

"Certainly in good health."

I looked around the room. Apart from the unmade bed with the brown spots on the sheets, it contained no signs of occupancy. Someone had spilled a pint of blood and vanished.

The little man opened the door wide and invited me with a sweep of his arm to leave. "If you will excuse me, sir, I wish to have this cleaned up as quickly as possible. Ella, will you tell Lorraine to get to work on it right away pronto? Then maybe you better lie down for a little while, eh?"

"I'm all right now, father. Don't worry about me."

When I checked out a few minutes later, she was sitting behind the desk in the front office, looking pale but composed. I dropped my key on the desk in front of her.

"Feeling better, Ella?"

"Oh. I didn't recognize you with all your clothes on."

"That's a good line. May I use it?"

She lowered her eyes and blushed. "You're making fun of me. I know I acted foolishly this morning."

"I'm not so sure. What do *you* think happened in Room Thirteen last night?"

"My father told you, didn't he?"

"He gave me a version, two of them in fact. I doubt that they're the final shooting script."

Her hand went to the central hollow in her blouse. Her arms and shoulders were slender and brown, the tips of her fingers carmine. "Shooting?"

"A cinema term," I said. "But there might have been a real

shooting at that. Don't you think so?"

Her front teeth pinched her lower lip. She looked like somebody's pet rabbit. I restrained an impulse to pat her sleek brown head.

"That's ridiculous. This is a respectable motel. Anyway, father asked me not to discuss it with anybody."

"Why would he do that?"

"He loves this place, that's why. He doesn't want any scandal made out of nothing. If we lost our good reputation here, it would break my father's heart."

"He doesn't strike me as the sentimental type."

She stood up, smoothing her skirt. I saw that she'd changed it. "You leave him alone. He's a dear little man. I don't know what you think you're doing, trying to stir up trouble where there isn't any."

I backed away from her righteous indignation—female indignation is always righteous—and went out to my car. The early spring sun was dazzling. Beyond the freeway and the drifted sugary dunes, the bay was Prussian blue. The road cut inland across the base of the peninsula and returned to the sea a few miles north of the town. Here a wide blacktop packing space shelved off to the left of the highway, overlooking the white beach and whiter breakers. Signs at each end of the turnout stated that this was a County Park, No Beach Fires.

The beach and the blacktop expanse above it were deserted except for a single car, which looked very lonely. It was a long black Cadillac nosed into the cable fence at the edge of the beach. I braked and turned off the highway and got out. The man in the driver's seat of the Cadillac didn't turn his head as I approached him. His chin was propped on the steering wheel, and he was gazing out across the endless blue sea.

I opened the door and looked into his face. It was paper-white. The dark brown eyes were sightless. The body was unclothed except for the thick hair matted on the chest, and a clumsy bandage tied around the waist. The bandage was composed of several blood-stained towels, held in place by a knotted piece of nylon fabric whose nature I didn't recognize immediately. Examining it more closely, I saw that it was a woman's slip. The left breast of the garment was embroidered in purple with a heart, containing the name *Fern*. I wondered who Fern was.

The man who was wearing her purple heart had dark curly

hair, heavy black eyebrows, a heavy chin sprouting black beard. He was rough-looking in spite of his anemia and the lipstick smudged on his mouth.

There was no registration on the steeringpost, and nothing in the glove compartment but a half-empty box of shells for a .38 automatic. The ignition was still turned on. So were the dash and headlights, but they were dim. The gas gauge registered empty. Curlyhead must have pulled off the highway soon after he passed me, and driven all the rest of the night in one place.

I untied the slip, which didn't look as if it would take fingerprints, and went over it for a label. It had one: Gretchen, Palm Springs. It occurred to me that it was Saturday morning and that I'd gone all winter without a weekend in the desert. I retied the slip the way I'd found it, and drove back to the Siesta Motel.

Ella's welcome was a few degrees colder than absolute zero. "Well!" She glared down her pretty rabbit nose at me. "I thought we were rid of you."

"So did I. But I just couldn't tear myself away."

She gave me a peculiar look, neither hard nor soft, but mixed. Her hand went to her hair, then reached for a registration card. "I suppose if you want to rent a room, I can't stop you. Only please don't imagine you're making an impression on me. You're not. You leave me cold, mister."

"Archer," I said. "Lew Archer. Don't bother with the card. I came back to use your phone."

"Aren't there any other phones?" She pushed the telephone across the desk. "I guess it's all right, long as it isn't a toll call."

"I'm calling the Highway Patrol. Do you know their local number?"

"I don't remember." She handed me the telephone directory.

"There's been an accident," I said as I dialed.

"A highway accident? Where did it happen?"

"Right here, sister. Right here in Room Thirteen."

But I didn't tell that to the Highway Patrol. I told them I had found a dead man in a car on the parking lot above the county beach. The girl listened with widening eyes and nostrils. Before I finished she rose in a flurry and left the office by the rear door.

She came back with the proprietor. His eyes were black and bright like nailheads in leather, and the scampering dance of his feet was almost frenzied. "What is this?"

"I came across a dead man up the road a piece."

"So why do you come back here to telephone?" His head was in butting position, his hands outspread and gripping the corners of the desk. "Has it got anything to do with us?"

"He's wearing a couple of your towels."

"What?"

"And he was bleeding heavily before he died. I think somebody shot him in the stomach. Maybe you did."

"You're loco," he said, but not very emphatically. "Crazy accusations like that, they will get you into trouble. What is your business?"

"I'm a private detective."

"You followed him here, is that it? You were going to arrest him, so he shot himself?"

"Wrong on both accounts," I said. "I came here to sleep. And they don't shoot themselves in the stomach. It's too uncertain, and slow. No suicide wants to die of peritonitis."

"So what are you doing now, trying to make scandal for my business?"

"If your business includes trying to cover up a murder."

"He shot himself," the little man insisted.

"How do you know?"

"Donny. I spoke to him just now."

"And how does Donny know?"

"The man told him."

"Is Donny your night keyboy?"

"He was. I think I will fire him, for stupidity. He didn't even tell me about this mess. I had to find it out for myself. The hard way."

"Donny means well," the girl said at his shoulder. "I'm sure he didn't realize what happened."

"Who does?" I said. "I want to talk to Donny. But first let's have a look at the register."

He took a pile of cards from a drawer and riffled through them. His large hands, hairy-backed, were calm and expert, like animals that lived a serene life of their own, independent of their emotional owner. They dealt me one of the cards across the desk. It was inscribed in block capitals: RICHARD ROWE, DETROIT, MICH.

I said, "There was a woman with him."

"Impossible."

"Or he was a transvestite."

He surveyed me blankly, thinking of something else. "The HP,

did you tell them to come here? They know it happened here?"

"Not yet. But they'll find your towels. He used them for bandage."

"I see. Yes. Of course." He struck himself with a clenched fist on the temple. It made a noise like someone maltreating a pumpkin. "You are a private detective, you say. Now if you informed the police that you were on the trail of a fugitive, a fugitive from justice. . . He shot himself rather than face arrest. . . For five hundred dollars?"

"I'm not that private," I said. "I have some public responsibility. Besides, the cops would do a little checking and catch me out."

"Not necessarily. He *was* a fugitive from justice, you know."

"I hear you telling me."

"Give me a little time and I can even present you with his record."

The girl was leaning back away from her father, her eyes starred with broken illusions. "Daddy," she said weakly.

He didn't hear her. All his bright black attention was fixed on me. "Seven hundred dollars?"

"No sale. The higher you raise it, the guiltier you look. Were you here last night?"

"You are being absurd," he said. "I spent the entire evening with my wife. We drove up to Los Angeles to attend the ballet." By way of supporting evidence, he hummed a couple of bars from Tchaikovsky. "We didn't arrive back here in Emerald Bay until nearly two o'clock."

"Alibis can be fixed."

"By criminals, yes," he said. "I am not a criminal."

The girl put a hand on his shoulder. He cringed, his face creased by monkey fury, but his face was hidden from her.

"Daddy," she said. "Was he murdered, do you think?"

"How do I know?" His voice was wild and high, as if she had touched the spring of his emotion. "I wasn't here. I only know what Donny told me."

The girl was examining me with narrowed eyes, as if I were a new kind of animal she had discovered and was trying to think of a use for.

"This gentleman is a detective," she said, "or claims to be."

I pulled out my photostat and slapped it down on the desk. The little man picked it up and looked from it to my face. "Will you go to work for me?"

"Doing what, telling little white lies?"

The girl answered for him. "See what you can find out about this—this death. On my word of honor, father had nothing to do with it."

I made a snap decision, the kind you live to regret. "All right. I'll take a fifty-dollar advance. Which is a good deal less than five hundred. My first advice to you is to tell the police everything you know. Provided that you're innocent."

"You insult me," he said.

But he flicked a fifty-dollar bill from the cash drawer and pressed it into my hand fervently, like a love token. I had a queasy feeling that I had been conned into taking his money, not much of it but enough. The feeling deepened when he still refused to talk. I had to use all the arts of persuasion even to get Donny's address out of him.

The keyboy lived in a shack on the edge of a desolate stretch of dunes. I guessed that it had once been somebody's beach house, before sand had drifted like unthawing snow in the angles of the walls and winter storms had broken the tiles and cracked the concrete foundations. Huge chunks of concrete were piled haphazardly on what had been a terrace overlooking the sea.

On one of the tilted slabs Donny was stretched like a long albino lizard in the sun. The onshore wind carried the sound of my motor to his ears. He sat up blinking, recognized me when I stopped the car, and ran into the house.

I descended flagstone steps and knocked on the warped door. "Open up, Donny."

"Go away," he answered huskily. His eye gleamed like a snail through a crack in the wood.

"I'm working for Mr. Salanda. He wants us to have a talk."

"You can go and take a running jump for yourself, you and Mr. Salanda both."

"Open it or I'll break it down."

I waited for a while. He shot back the bolt. The door creaked reluctantly open. He leaned against the doorpost, searching my face with his eyes, his hairless body shivering from an internal chill. I pushed past him, through a kitchenette that was indescribably filthy, littered with the remnants of old meals, and gaseous with their odors. He followed me silently on bare soles into a larger room whose sprung floorboards undulated under my feet. The picture window had been broken and patched with

cardboard. The stone fireplace was choked with garbage. The only furniture was an army cot in one corner where Donny apparently slept.

"Nice homey place you have here. It has that lived-in quality."

He seemed to take it as a compliment, and I wondered if I was dealing with a moron. "It suits me. I never was much of a one for fancy quarters. I like it here, where I can hear the ocean at night."

"What else do you hear at night, Donny?"

He missed the point of the question, or pretended to. "All different things. Big trucks going past on the highway. I like to hear those night sounds. Now I guess I can't go on living here. Mr. Salanda owns it, he lets me live here for nothing. Now he'll be kicking me out of here, I guess."

"On account of what happened last night?"

"Uh-huh." He subsided onto the cot, his doleful head supported by his hands.

I stood over him. "Just what did happen last night, Donny?"

"A bad thing," he said. "This fella checked in about ten o'clock—"

"The man with the dark curly hair?"

"That's the one. He checked in about ten, and I gave him Room Thirteen. Around about midnight I thought I heard a gun go off from there. It took me a little while to get my nerve up, then I went back to see what was going on. This fella came out of the room, without no clothes on. Just some kind of a bandage around his waist. He looked like some kind of a crazy Indian or something. He had a gun in his hand, and he was staggering, and I could see that he was bleeding some. He come right up to me and pushed the gun in my gut and told me to keep my trap shut. He said I wasn't to tell anybody I saw him, now or later. He said if I opened my mouth about it to anybody he would come back and kill me. But now he's dead, isn't he?"

"He's dead."

I could smell the fear in Donny: there's an unexplained trace of canine in my chromosomes. The hairs were prickling on the back of my neck, and I wondered if Donny's fear was of the past or for the future. The pimples stood out in bas-relief against his pale lugubrious face.

"I think he was murdered, Donny. You're lying, aren't you?"

"Me lying?" But his reaction was slow and feeble.

"The dead man didn't check in alone. He had a woman with him."

"What woman?" he said in elaborate surprise.

"You tell me. Her name was Fern. I think she did the shooting, and you caught her red-handed. The wounded man got out of the room and into his car and away. The woman stayed behind to talk to you. She probably paid you to dispose of his clothes and fake a new registration card for the room. But you both overlooked the blood on the floor of the bathroom. Am I right?"

"You couldn't be wronger, mister. Are you a cop?"

"A private detective. You're in deep trouble, Donny. You'd better talk yourself out of it before the cops start on you."

"I didn't do anything." His voice broke like a boy's. It went strangely with the glints of gray in his hair.

"Faking the register is a serious rap, even if they don't hang accessory to murder on you."

He began to expostulate in formless sentences that ran together. At the same time his hand was moving across the dirty gray blanket. It burrowed under the pillow and came out holding a crumpled card. He tried to stuff it into his mouth and chew it. I tore it away from between his discolored teeth.

It was a registration card from the motel, signed in a boyish scrawl: *Mr. and Mrs. Richard Rowe, Detroit, Mich.*

Donny was trembling violently. Below his cheap cotton shorts his bony knees vibrated like tuning forks. "It wasn't my fault," he cried. "She held a gun on me."

"What did you do with the man's clothes?"

"Nothing. She didn't even let me into the room. She bundled them up and took them away herself."

"Where did she go?"

"Down the highway towards town. She walked away on the shoulder of the road and that was the last I saw of her."

"How much did she pay you, Donny?"

"Nothing, not a cent. I already told you, she held a gun on me."

"And you were so scared you kept quiet until this morning?"

"That's right. I was scared. Who wouldn't be scared?"

"She's gone now," I said. "You can give me a description of her."

"Yeah." He made a visible effort to pull his vague thoughts together. One of his eyes was a little off center, lending his face a stunned, amorphous appearance. "She was a big tall dame with blondey hair."

"Dyed?"

"I guess so, I dunno. She wore it in a braid like, on top of her head. She was kind of fat, built like a lady wrestler, great big watermelons on her. Big legs."

"How was she dressed?"

"I didn't hardly notice, I was so scared. I think she had some kind of a purple coat on, with black fur around the neck. Plenty of rings on her fingers and stuff."

"How old?"

"Pretty old, I'd say. Older than me, and I'm going on thirty-nine."

"And she did the shooting?"

"I guess so. She told me to say if anybody asked me, I was to say that Mr. Rowe shot himself."

"You're very suggestible, aren't you, Donny? It's a dangerous way to be, with people pushing each other around the way they do."

"I didn't get that, mister. Come again." He batted his pale blue eyes at me, smiling expectantly.

"Skip it," I said and left him.

A few hundred yards up the highway I passed an HP car with two uniformed men in the front seat looking grim. Donny was in for it now. I pushed him out of my mind and drove across country to Palm Springs.

Palm Springs is still a one-horse town, but the horse is a Palomino with silver trappings. Most of the girls are Palomino too. The main street was a cross-section of Hollywood and Vine transported across the desert by some unnatural force and disguised in western costumes which fooled nobody. Not even me.

I found Gretchen's lingerie shop in an expensive-looking arcade built around an imitation flagstone patio. In the patio's center a little fountain gurgled pleasantly, flinging small lariats of spray against the heat. It was late in March, and the season was ending. Most of the shops, including the one I entered, were deserted except for the hired help.

It was a small shop, faintly perfumed by a legion of vanished dolls. Stockings and robes and other garments were coiled on the glass counters or hung like brilliant treesnakes on display stands along the narrow walls. A henna-headed woman emerged from rustling recesses at the rear and came tripping toward me on her toes.

"You are looking for a gift, sir?" she cried with a wilted kind of gaiety. Behind her painted mask she was tired and aging and it was Saturday afternoon and the lucky ones were dunking themselves in kidney-shaped swimming pools behind walls she couldn't climb.

"Not exactly. In fact, not at all. A peculiar thing happened to me last night. I'd like to tell you about it, but it's kind of a complicated story."

She looked me over quizzically and decided that I worked for a living too. The phony smile faded away. Another smile took its place, which I liked better. "You look as if you'd had a fairly rough night. And you could do with a shave."

"I met a girl," I said. "Actually she was a mature woman, a statuesque blonde to be exact. I picked her up on the beach at Laguna, if you want me to be brutally frank."

"I couldn't bear it if you weren't. What kind of a pitch is this, brother?"

"Wait. You're spoiling my story. Something clicked when we met, in that sunset light, on the edge of the warm summer sea."

"It's always bloody cold when I go in."

"It wasn't last night. We swam in the moonlight and had a gay time and all. Then she went away. I didn't realize until she was gone that I didn't know her telephone number, or even her last name."

"Married woman, eh? What do you think I am, a lonely hearts club?" Still, she was interested, though she probably didn't believe me. "She mentioned me, is that it? What was her first name?"

"Fern."

"Unusual name. You say she was a big blonde?"

"Magnificently proportioned," I said. "If I had a classical education I'd call her Junoesque."

"You're kidding me, aren't you?"

"A little."

"I thought so. Personally I don't mind a little kidding. What did she say about me?"

"Nothing but good. As a matter of fact, I was complimenting her on her—er—garments."

"I see." She was long past blushing. "We had a customer last fall some time by the name of Fern. Fern Dee. She had some kind of a job at the Joshua Club, I think. But she doesn't fit the description at all. This one was a brunette, a middle-sized brunette,

quite young. I remember the name Fern because she wanted it embroidered on all the things she bought. A corny idea if you ask me, but that was her girlish desire and who am I to argue with girlish desires."

"Is she still in town?"

"I haven't seen her lately, not for months. But it couldn't be the woman you're looking for. Or could it?"

"How long ago was she in here?"

She pondered. "Early last fall, around the start of the season. She only came in that once, and made a big purchase, stockings and nightwear and underthings. The works. I remember thinking at the time, here was a girlie who suddenly hit the chips but heavily."

"She might have put on weight since then, and dyed her hair. Strange things can happen to the female form."

"You're telling me," she said. "How old was—your friend?"

"About forty, I'd say, give or take a little."

"It couldn't be the same one then. The girl I'm talking about was twenty-five at the outside, and I don't make mistakes about women's ages. I've seen too many of them in all stages, from Quentin quail to hags, and I certainly do mean hags."

"I bet you have."

She studied me with eyes shadowed by mascara and experience. "You a policeman?"

"I have been."

"You want to tell mother what it's all about?"

"Another time. Where's the Joshua Club?"

"It won't be open yet."

"I'll try it anyway."

She shrugged her thin shoulders and gave me directions. I thanked her.

It occupied a plain-faced one-story building half a block off the main street. The padded leather door swung inward when I pushed it. I passed through a lobby with a retractable roof, which contained a jungle growth of banana trees. The big main room was decorated with tinted desert photomurals. Behind a rattan bar with a fishnet canopy a white-coated Caribbean type was drying shot glasses with a dirty towel. His face looked uncommunicative.

On the orchestra dais beyond the piled chairs in the dining area a young man in shirt sleeves was playing bop piano. His fingers

shadowed the tune, ran circles around it, played leap-frog with it, and managed never to hit it on the nose. I stood beside him for a while and listened to him work. He looked up finally, still strumming with his left hand in the bass. He had soft-centered eyes and frozen-looking nostrils and a whistling mouth.

"Nice piano," I said.

"I think so."

"Fifty-second Street?"

"It's the street with the beat and I'm not effete." His left hand struck the same chord three times and dropped away from the keys. "Looking for somebody, friend?"

"Fern Dee. She asked me to drop by sometime."

"Too bad. Another wasted trip. She left here end of last year, the dear. She wasn't a bad little nightingale but she was no pro, Joe, you know? She had it but she couldn't project it. When she warbled the evening died, no matter how hard she tried, I don't wanna be snide."

"Where did she lam, Sam, or don't you give a damn?"

He smiled like a corpse in a deft mortician's hands. "I heard the boss retired her to private life. Took her home to live with him. That is what I heard. But I don't mix with the big boy socially, so I couldn't say for sure that she's impure. Is it anything to you?"

"Something, but she's over twenty-one."

"Not more than a couple of years over twenty-one." His eyes darkened, and his thin mouth twisted sideways angrily. "I hate to see it happen to a pretty little twist like Fern. Not that I yearn—"

I broke in on his nonsense rhymes: "Who's the big boss you mentioned, the one Fern went to live with?"

"Angel. Who else?"

"What heaven does he inhabit?"

"You must be new in these parts—" His eyes swiveled and focused on something over my shoulder. His mouth opened and closed.

A grating tenor said behind me, "Got a question you want answered, bud?"

The pianist went back to the piano as if the ugly tenor had wiped me out, annulled my very existence. I turned to its source. He was standing in a narrow doorway behind the drums, a man in his thirties with thick black curly hair and a heavy jaw blue-shadowed by closely shaven beard. He was almost the living image of the dead man in the Cadillac. The likeness gave me a

jolt. The heavy black gun in his hand gave me another.

He came around the drums and approached me, bull-shouldered in a fuzzy tweed jacket, holding the gun in front of him like a dangerous gift. The pianist was doing wry things in quickened tempo with the dead march from *Saul*. A wit.

The dead man's almost-double waved his cruel chin and the crueler gun in unison. "Come inside, unless you're a government man. If you are, I'll have a look at your credentials."

"I'm a freelance."

"Inside then."

The muzzle of the automatic came into my solar plexus like a pointing iron finger. Obeying its injunction, I made my way between empty music stands and through the narrow door behind the drums. The iron finger, probing my back, directed me down a lightless corridor to a small square office containing a metal desk, a safe, a filing cabinet. It was windowless, lit by fluorescent tubes in the ceiling. Under their pitiless glare, the face above the gun looked more than ever like the dead man's face. I wondered if I had been mistaken about his deadness, or if the desert heat had addled my brain.

"I'm the manager here," he said, standing so close that I could smell the piney stuff he used on his crisp dark hair. "You got anything to ask about the members of the staff, you ask me."

"Will I get an answer?"

"Try me, bud."

"The name is Archer," I said. "I'm a private detective."

"Working for who?"

"You wouldn't be interested."

"I am, though, very much interested." The gun hopped forward like a toad into my stomach again, with the weight of his shoulder behind it. "Working for who did you say?"

I swallowed anger and nausea, estimating my chances of knocking the gun to one side and taking him bare-handed. The chances seemed pretty slim. He was heavier than I was, and he held the automatic as if it had grown out of the end of his arm. You've seen too many movies, I told myself. I told him, "A motel owner on the coast. A man was shot in one of his rooms last night. I happened to check in there a few minutes later. The old boy hired me to look into the shooting."

"Who was it got himself ventilated?"

"He could be your brother," I said. "Do you have a brother?"

He lost his color. The center of his attention shifted from the gun to my face. The gun nodded. I knocked it up and sideways with a hard left uppercut. Its discharge burned the side of my face and drilled a hole in the wall. My right sank into his neck. The gun thumped the cork floor.

He went down but not out, his spread hand scrabbling for the gun, then closing on it. I kicked his wrist. He grunted but wouldn't let go of it. I threw a punch at the short hairs on the back of his neck. He took it and came up under it with the gun, shaking his head from side to side.

"Up with the hands now," he murmured. He was one of those men whose voices go soft and mild when they are in a killing mood. He had the glassy impervious eyes of a killer. "Is Bart dead? My brother?"

"Very dead. He was shot in the belly."

"Who shot him?"

"That's the question."

"Who shot him?" he said in a quite white-faced rage. The single eye of the gun stared emptily at my midriff. "It could happen to you, bud, here and now."

"A woman was with him. She took a quick powder after it happened."

"I heard you say a name to Alfie, the piano player. Was it Fern?"

"It could have been."

"What do you mean, it could have been?"

"She was there in the room, apparently. If you can give me a description of her?"

His hard brown eyes looked past me. "I can do better than that. There's a picture of her on the wall behind you. Take a look at it. Keep those hands up high."

I shifted my feet and turned uneasily. The wall was blank. I heard him draw a breath and move, and tried to evade his blow. No use. It caught the back of my head. I pitched forward against the blank wall and slid down it into three dimensions of blankness.

The blankness coagulated into colored shapes. The shapes were half human and half beast and they dissolved and reformed. A dead man with a hairy breast climbed out of a hole and doubled and quadrupled. I ran away from them through a twisting tunnel which led to an echo chamber. Under the roaring surge of the

nightmare music, a rasping tenor was saying:

"I figure it like this. Vario's tip was good. Bart found her in Acapulco, and he was bringing her back from there. She conned him into stopping off at this motel for the night. Bart always went for her."

"I didn't know that," a dry old voice put in. "This is very interesting news about Bart and Fern. You should have told me before about this. Then I would not have sent him for her and this would not have happened. Would it, Gino?"

My mind was still partly absent, wandering underground in the echoing caves. I couldn't recall the voices, or who they were talking about. I had barely sense enough to keep my eyes closed and go on listening. I was lying on my back on a hard surface. The voices were above me.

The tenor said: "You can't blame Bartolomeo. She's the one, the dirty treacherous lying little bitch."

"Calm yourself, Gino. I blame nobody. But more than ever now, we want her back, isn't that right?"

"I'll kill her," he said softly, almost wistfully.

"Perhaps. It may not be necessary now. I dislike promiscuous killing—"

"Since when, Angel?"

"Don't interrupt, it's not polite. I learned to put first things first. Now what is the most important thing? Why did we want her back in the first place? I will tell you: to shut her mouth. The government heard she left me, they wanted her to testify about my income. We wanted to find her first and shut her mouth, isn't that right?"

"I know how to shut her mouth," the younger man said very quietly.

"First we try a better way, my way. You learn when you're as old as I am there is a use for everything, and not to be wasteful. Not even wasteful with somebody else's blood. She shot your brother, right? So now we have something on her, strong enough to keep her mouth shut for good. She'd get off with second degree, with what she's got, but even that is five to ten in Tehachapi. I think all I need to do is tell her that. First we have to find her, eh?"

"I'll find her. Bart didn't have any trouble finding her."

"With Vario's tip to help him, no. But I think I'll keep you here with me, Gino. You're too hot-blooded, you and your brother both.

I want her alive. Then I can talk to her, and then we'll see."

"You're going soft in your old age, Angel."

"Am I?" There was a light slapping sound, of a blow on flesh. "I have killed many men, for good reasons. So I think you will take that back."

"I take it back."

"And call me Mr. Funk. If I am so old, you will treat my gray hairs with respect. Call me Mr. Funk."

"Mr. Funk."

"All right, your friend here, does he know where Fern is?"

"I don't think so."

"Mr. Funk."

"Mr. Funk." Gino's voice was a whining snarl.

"I think he's coming to. His eyelids fluttered."

The toe of a shoe prodded my side. Somebody slapped my face a number of times. I opened my eyes and sat up. The back of my head was throbbing like an engine fueled by pain. Gino rose from a squatting position and stood over me.

"Stand up."

I rose shakily to my feet. I was in a stone-walled room with a high beamed ceiling, sparsely furnished with stiff old black oak chairs and tables. The room and the furniture seemed to have been built for a race of giants.

The man behind Gino was small and old and weary. He might have been an unsuccessful grocer or a superannuated barkeep who had come to California for his health. Clearly his health was poor. Even in the stifling heat he looked pale and chilly, as if he had caught chronic death from one of his victims. He moved closer to me, his legs shuffling feebly in wrinkled blue trousers that bagged at the knees. His shrunken torso was swathed in a heavy blue turtleneck sweater. He had two days' beard on his chin, like moth-eaten gray plush.

"Gino informs me that you are investigating a shooting." His accent was Middle-European and very faint, as if he had forgotten his origins. "Where did this happen, exactly?"

"I don't think I'll tell you that. You can read it in the papers tomorrow night if you are interested."

"I am not prepared to wait. I am impatient. Do you know where Fern is?"

"I wouldn't be here if I did."

"But you know where she was last night."

"I couldn't be sure."

"Tell me anyway to the best of your knowledge."

"I don't think I will."

"He doesn't think he will," the old man said to Gino.

"I think you better let me out of here. Kidnaping is a tough rap. You don't want to die in the pen."

He smiled at me, with a tolerance more terrible than anger. His eyes were like thin stab wounds filled with watery blood. Shuffling unhurriedly to the head of the mahogany table behind him, he pressed a spot in the rug with the toe of one felt slipper. Two men in blue serge suits entered the room and stepped toward me briskly. They belonged to the race of giants the room had been built for.

Gino moved behind me and reached to pin my arms. I pivoted, landed one short punch, and took a very hard counter below the belt. Something behind me slammed my kidneys with the heft of a trailer truck bumper. I turned on weakening legs and caught a chin with my elbow. Gino's fist, or one of the beams from the ceiling, landed on my neck. My head rang like a gong. Under its clangor Angel was saying pleasantly, "Where was Fern last night?"

I didn't say.

The men in blue serge held me upright by the arms while Gino used my head as a punching bag. I rolled with his lefts and rights as well as I could, but his timing improved and mine deteriorated. His face wavered and receded. At intervals Angel inquired politely if I was willing to assist him now. I asked myself confusedly in the hail of fists what I was holding out for or who I was protecting. Probably I was holding out for myself. It seemed important to me not to give in to violence. But my identity was dissolving and receding like the face in front of me.

I concentrated on hating Gino's face. That kept it clear and steady for a while: a stupid square-jawed face barred by a single black brow, two close-set brown eyes staring glassily. His fists continued to rock me like an air-hammer.

Finally Angel placed a clawed hand on his shoulder, and nodded to my handlers. They deposited me in a chair. It swung on an invisible wire from the ceiling in great circles. It swung out wide over the desert, across a bleak horizon, into darkness.

I came to, cursing. Gino was standing over me again. There was an empty water glass in his hand, and my face was dripping.

Angel spoke up beside him, with a trace of irritation in his voice.

"You stand up good under punishment. Why go to all the trouble, though? I want a little information, that is all. My friend, my little girl friend, ran away. I'm impatient to get her back."

"You're going about it the wrong way."

Gino leaned close and laughed harshly. He shattered the glass on the arm of my chair, held the jagged base up to my eyes. Fear ran through me, cold and light in my veins. My eyes were my connection with everything. Blindness would be the end of me. I closed my eyes, shutting out the cruel edges of the broken thing in his hand.

"Nix, Gino," the old man said. "I have a better idea, as usual. There is heat on, remember."

They retreated to the far side of the table and conferred there in low voices. The young man left the room. The old man came back to me. His storm troopers stood one on each side of me, looking down at him in ignorant awe.

"What is your name, young fellow?"

I told him. My mouth was puffed and lisping, tongue tangled in ropes of blood.

"I like a young fellow who can take it, Mr. Archer. You say you're a detective. You find people for a living, is that right?"

"I have a client," I said.

"Now you have another. Whoever he is, I can buy and sell him, believe me. Fifty times over." His thin blue hands scoured each other. They made a sound like two dry sticks rubbing together on a dead tree.

"Narcotics?" I said. "Are you the wheel in the heroin racket? I've heard of you."

His watery eyes veiled themselves like a bird's. "Now don't ask foolish questions or I will lose my respect for you."

"That would break my heart."

"Then comfort yourself with this." He brought an old-fashioned purse out of his hip pocket, abstracted a crumpled bill, and smoothed it out on my knee. It was a five-hundred-dollar bill.

"This girl of mine you are going to find for me, she is young and foolish. I am old and foolish, to have trusted her. No matter. Find her for me and bring her back and I will give you another bill like this one. Take it."

"Take it," one of my guards repeated. "Mr. Funk said for you to take it."

I took it. "You're wasting your money. I don't even know what she looks like. I don't know anything about her."

"Gino is bringing a picture. He came across her last fall at a recording studio in Hollywood where Alfie had a date. He gave her an audition and took her on at the club, more for her looks than for the talent she had. As a singer she flopped. But she is a pretty little thing, about five foot four, nice figure, dark brown hair, big hazel eyes. I found a use for her."

"You find a use for everything."

"That is good economics. I often think if I wasn't what I am, I would make a good economist. Nothing would go to waste." He paused and dragged his dying old mind back to the subject. "She was here for a couple of months, then she ran out on me, silly girl. I heard last week that she was in Acapulco, and the federal Grand Jury was going to subpoena her. I have tax troubles, Mr. Archer, all my life I have tax troubles. Unfortunately I let Fern help with my books a little bit. She could do me great harm. So I sent Bart to Mexico to bring her back. But I meant no harm to her. I still intend her no harm, even now. A little talk, a little realistic discussion with Fern, that is all that will be necessary. So even the shooting of my good friend Bart serves its purpose. Where did it happen, by the way?"

The question flicked out like a hook on the end of a long line.

"In San Diego," I said, "at a place near the airport: the Mission Motel."

He smiled paternally. "Now you are showing good sense."

Gino came back with a silver-framed photograph in his hand. He handed it to Angel, who passed it on to me. It was a studio portrait, of the kind intended for publicity cheesecake. On a black velvet divan, against an artificial night sky, a young woman reclined in a gossamer robe that was split to show one bent leg. Shadows accentuated the lines of her body and the fine bones in her face. Under the heavy makeup which widened the mouth and darkened the half-closed eyes, I recognized Ella Salanda. The picture was signed in white, in the lower righthand corner: *To my Angel, with all my love, Fern.*

A sickness assailed me, worse than the sickness induced by Gino's fists. Angel breathed into my face: "Fern Dee is a stage name. Her real name I never learned. She told me one time that if her family knew where she was they would die of shame." He chuckled. "She will not want them to know that she killed a man."

I drew away from his charnel-house breath. My guards escorted me out. Gino started to follow, but Angel called him back.

"Don't wait to hear from me," the old man said after me. "I expect to hear from you."

The building stood on a rise in the open desert. It was huge and turreted, like somebody's idea of a castle in Spain. The last rays of the sun washed its walls in purple light and cast long shadows across its barren acreage. It was surrounded by a ten-foot hurricane fence topped with three strands of barbed wire.

Palm Springs was a clutter of white stones in the distance, diamonded by an occasional light. The dull red sun was balanced like a glowing cigar butt on the rim of the hills above the town. A man with a bulky shoulder harness under his brown suede windbreaker drove me toward it. The sun fell out of sight, and darkness gathered like an impalpable ash on the desert, like a column of blue-gray smoke towering into the sky.

The sky was blue-black and swarming with stars when I got back to Emerald Bay. A black Cadillac followed me out of Palm Springs. I lost it in the winding streets of Pasadena. So far as I could see, I had lost it for good.

The neon Mexican lay peaceful under the stars. A smaller sign at his feet asserted that there was No Vacancy. The lights in the long low stucco buildings behind him shone brightly. The office door was open behind a screen, throwing a barred rectangle of light on the gravel. I stepped into it, and froze.

Behind the registration desk in the office a woman was avidly reading a magazine. Her shoulders and bosom were massive. Her hair was blonde, piled on her head in coroneted braids. There were rings on her fingers, a triple strand of cultured pearls around her thick white throat. She was the woman Donny had described to me. I opened the screen door and said, "Who are you?"

She glanced up, twisting her mouth in a sour grimace. "Well! I'll thank you to keep a civil tongue in your head."

"Sorry. I thought I'd seen you before somewhere."

"Well, you haven't." She looked me over coldly. "What happened to your face, anyway?"

"I had a little plastic surgery done. By an amateur surgeon."

She clucked disapprovingly. "If you're looking for a room, we're full up for the night. I don't believe I'd rent you a room even if we weren't. Look at your clothes."

"Uh-huh. Where's Mr. Salanda?"

"Is it any business of yours?"

"He wants to see me. I'm doing a job for him."

"What kind of a job?"

I mimicked her. "Is it any business of yours?" I was irritated. Under her mounds of flesh she had a personality as thin and hard and abrasive as a rasp.

"Watch who you're getting flip with, sonny boy." She rose, and her shadow loomed immense across the back door of the room. The magazine fell closed on the desk: it was *Teen-age Confessions*. "I am Mrs. Salanda. Are you a handyman?"

"A sort of one," I said. "I'm a garbage collector in the moral field. You look as if you could use me."

The crack went over her head. "Well, you're wrong. And I don't think my husband hired you, either. This is a respectable motel."

"Uh-huh. Are you Ella's mother?"

"I should say not. That little snip is no daughter of mine."

"Her stepmother?"

"Mind your own business. You better get out of here. The police are keeping a close watch on this place tonight, if you're planning any tricks."

"Where's Ella now?"

"I don't know and I don't care. She's probably gallivanting off around the countryside. It's all she's good for. One day at home in the last six months, that's a fine record for a young unmarried girl." Her face was thick and bloated with anger against her stepdaughter. She went on talking blindly, as if she had forgotten me entirely. "I told her father he was an old fool to take her back. How does he know what she's been up to? I say let the ungrateful filly go and fend for herself."

"Is that what you say, Mabel?" Salanda had softly opened the door behind her. He came forward into the room, doubly dwarfed by her blonde magnitude. "I say if it wasn't for you, my dear, Ella wouldn't have been driven away from home in the first place."

She turned on him in a blubbering rage. He drew himself up tall and reached to snap his fingers under her nose. "Go back into the house. You are a disgrace to women, a disgrace to motherhood."

"I'm not *her* mother, thank God."

"Thank God," he echoed, shaking his fist at her. She retreated like a schooner under full sail, menaced by a gunboat. The door

closed on her. Salanda turned to me.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Archer. I have difficulties with my wife, I am ashamed to say it. I was an imbecile to marry again. I gained a senseless hulk of flesh and lost my daughter. Old imbecile!" he denounced himself, wagging his great head sadly. "I married in hot blood. Passion has always been my downfall. It runs in my family, this insane hunger for bloneness and stupidity and size." He spread his arms in a wide and futile embrace on emptiness.

"Forget it."

"If I could." He came closer to examine my face. "You are injured, Mr. Archer. Your mouth is damaged. There is blood on your chin."

"I was in a slight brawl."

"On my account?"

"On my own. But I think it's time you leveled with me."

"Leveled with you?"

"Told me the truth. You knew who was shot last night, and who shot him, and why."

He touched my arm, with a quick tentative grace. "I have only one daughter, Mr. Archer, only the one child. It was my duty to defend her, as best as I could."

"Defend her from what?"

"From shame, from the police, from prison." He flung one arm out, indicating the whole range of human disaster. "I am a man of honor, Mr. Archer. But private honor stands higher with me than public honor. The man was abducting my daughter. She brought him here in the hope of being rescued. Her last hope."

"I think that's true. You should have told me this before."

"I was alarmed, upset. I feared your intentions. Any minute the police were due to arrive."

"But you had a right to shoot him. It wasn't even a crime. The crime was his."

"I didn't know that then. The truth came out to me gradually. I feared that Ella was involved with him." His flat black gaze sought my face and rested on it. "However, I did not shoot him, Mr. Archer. I was not even here at the time. I told you that this morning, and you may take my word for it."

"Was Mrs. Salanda here?"

"No, sir, she was not. Why should you ask me that?"

"Donny described the woman who checked in with the dead man. The description fits your wife."

"Donny was lying. I told him to give a false description of the woman. Apparently he was unequal to the task of inventing one."

"Can you prove that she was with you?"

"Certainly I can. We had reserved seats at the theater. Those who sat around us can testify that the seats were not empty. Mrs. Salanda and I, we are not an inconspicuous couple." He smiled wryly.

"Ella killed him then."

He neither assented nor denied it. "I was hoping that you were on my side, my side and Ella's. Am I wrong?"

"I'll have to talk to her before I know myself. Where is she?"

"I do not know, Mr. Archer, sincerely I do not know. She went away this afternoon, after the policemen questioned her. They were suspicious, but we managed to soothe their suspicions. They did not know she had just come home, from another life, and I did not tell them. Mabel wanted to tell them. I silenced her." His white teeth clicked together.

"What about Donny?"

"They took him down to the station for questioning. He told them nothing damaging. Donny can appear very stupid when he wishes. He has the reputation of an idiot, but he is not so dumb. Donny has been with me for many years. He has a deep devotion for my daughter. I got him released tonight."

"You should have taken my advice," I said, "taken the police into your confidence. Nothing would have happened to you. The dead man was a mobster, and what he was doing amounts to kidnapping. Your daughter was a witness against his boss."

"She told me that. I am glad that it is true. Ella has not always told me the truth. She has been a hard girl to bring up, without a good mother to set her an example. Where has she been these last six months, Mr. Archer?"

"Singing in a night club in Palm Springs. Her boss was a racketeer."

"A racketeer?" His mouth and nose screwed up, as if he sniffed the odor of corruption.

"Where she was isn't important, compared with where she is now. The boss is still after her. He hired me to look for her."

Salanda regarded me with fear and dislike, as if the odor originated in me. "You let him hire you?"

"It was my best chance of getting out of his place alive. I'm not his boy, if that's what you mean."

"You ask me to believe you?"

"I'm telling you. Ella is in danger. As a matter of fact, we all are." I didn't tell him about the second black Cadillac. Gino would be driving it, wandering the night roads with a ready gun in his armpit and revenge corroding his heart.

"My daughter is aware of the danger," he said. "She warned me of it."

"She must have told you where she was going."

"No. But she may be at the beach house. The house where Donny lives. I will come with you."

"You stay here. Keep your doors locked. If any strangers show and start prowling the place, call the police."

He bolted the door behind me as I went out. Yellow traffic lights cast wan reflections on the asphalt. Streams of cars went by to the north, to the south. To the west, where the sea lay, a great black emptiness opened under the stars. The beach house sat on its white margin, a little over a mile from the motel.

For the second time that day I knocked on the warped kitchen door. There was light behind it, shining through the cracks. A shadow obscured the light.

"Who is it?" Donny said. Fear or some other emotion had filled his mouth with pebbles.

"You know me, Donny."

The door groaned on its hinges. He gestured dumbly to me to come in, his face a white blur. When he turned his head, and the light from the living room caught his face, I saw that grief was the emotion that marked it. His eyes were swollen as if he had been crying. More than ever he resembled a dilapidated boy whose growing pains had never paid off in manhood.

"Anybody with you?"

Sounds of movement in the living room answered my question. I brushed him aside and went in. Ella Salanda was bent over an open suitcase on the camp cot. She straightened, her mouth thin, eyes wide and dark. The .38 automatic in her hand gleamed dully under the naked bulb suspended from the ceiling.

"I'm getting out of here," she said, "and you're not going to stop me."

"I'm not sure I want to try. Where are you going, Fern?"

Donny spoke behind me, in his grief-thickened voice. "She's going away from me. She promised to stay here if I did what she told me. She promised to be my girl—"

"Shut up, stupid." Her voice cut like a lash, and Donny gasped as if the lash had been laid across his back.

"What did she tell you to do, Donny? Tell me just what you did."

"When she checked in last night with the fella from Detroit, she made a sign I wasn't to let on I knew her. Later on she left me a note. She wrote it with a lipstick on a piece of paper towel. I still got it hidden, in the kitchen."

"What did she write in the note?"

He lingered behind me, fearful of the gun in the girl's hand, more fearful of her anger.

She said, "Don't be crazy, Donny. He doesn't know a thing, not a thing. He can't do anything to either of us."

"I don't care what happens, to me or anybody else," the anguished voice said behind me. "You're running out on me, breaking your promise to me. I always knew it was too good to be true. Now I just don't care any more."

"I care," she said. "I care what happens to me." Her eyes shifted to me, above the unwavering gun. "I won't stay here. I'll shoot you if I have to."

"It shouldn't be necessary. Put it down, Fern. It's Bartolomeo's gun, isn't it? I found the shells to fit it in his glove compartment."

"How do you know so much?"

"I talked to Angel."

"Is he here?" Panic whined in her voice.

"No. I came alone."

"You better leave the same way then, while you can go under your own power."

"I'm staying. You need protection, whether you know it or not. And I need information. Donny, go in the kitchen and bring me that note."

"Don't do it, Donny. I'm warning you."

His sneakered feet made soft indecisive sounds. I advanced on the girl, talking quietly and steadily, "You conspired to kill a man, but you don't have to be afraid. He had it coming. Tell the whole story to the cops, and my guess is they won't even book you. Hell, you can even become famous. The government wants you as a witness in a tax case."

"What kind of a case?"

"A tax case against Angel. It's probably the only kind of rap they can pin on him. You can send him up for the rest of his life

like Capone. You'll be a heroine, Fern."

"Don't call me Fern. I hate that name." There were sudden tears in her eyes. "I hate everything connected with that name. I hate myself."

"You'll hate yourself more if you don't put down that gun. Shoot me and it all starts over again. The cops will be on your trail, Angel's troopers will be gunning for you."

Now only the cot was between us, the cot and the unsteady gun facing me above it.

"This is the turning point," I said. "You've made a lot of bum decisions and almost ruined yourself, playing footsie with the evilest men there are. You can go on the way you have been, getting in deeper until you end up in a refrigerated drawer, or you can come back out of it now, into a decent life."

"A decent life? Here? With my father married to Mabel?"

"I don't think Mabel will last much longer. Anyway, I'm not Mabel. I'm on your side."

I waited. She dropped the gun on the blanket. I scooped it up and turned to Donny. "Let me see that note."

He disappeared through the kitchen door, head and shoulders drooping on the long stalk of his body.

"What could I do?" the girl said. "I was caught. It was Bart or me. All the way up from Acapulco I planned how I could get away. He held a gun in my side when we crossed the border; the same way when we stopped for gas or to eat at the drive-ins. I realized he had to be killed. My father's motel looked like my only chance. So I talked Bart into staying there with me overnight. He had no idea who the place belonged to. I didn't know what I was going to do. I only knew it had to be something drastic. Once I was back with Angel in the desert, that was the end of me. Even if he didn't kill me, it meant I'd have to go on living with him. Anything was better than that. So I wrote a note to Donny in the bathroom, and dropped it out the window. He was always crazy about me."

Her mouth had grown softer. She looked remarkably young and virginal. The faint blue hollows under her eyes were dewy. "Donny shot Bart with Bart's own gun. He had more nerve than I had. I lost my nerve when I went back into the room this morning. I didn't know about the blood in the bathroom. It was the last straw."

She was wrong. Something crashed in the kitchen. A cool draft

swept the living room. A gun spoke twice, out of sight. Donny fell backward through the doorway, a piece of brownish paper clutched in his hand. Blood gleamed on his shoulder like a red badge.

I stepped behind the cot and pulled the girl down to the floor with me. Gino came through the door, his two-colored sports shoe stepping on Donny's laboring chest. I shot the gun out of his hand. He floundered back against the wall, clutching at his wrist.

I sighted carefully for my second shot, until the black bar of his eyebrows was steady in the sights of the .38. The hole it made was invisible. Gino fell loosely forward, prone on the floor beside the man he had killed.

Ella Salanda ran across the room. She knelt, and cradled Donny's head in her lap. Incredibly he spoke, in a loud sighing voice, "You won't go away again, Ella? I did what you told me. You promised."

"Sure I promised. I won't leave you, Donny. Crazy man. Crazy fool."

"You like me better than you used to? Now?"

"I like you, Donny. You're the most man there is."

She held the poor insignificant head in her hands. He sighed, and his life came out bright-colored at the mouth. It was Donny who went away.

His hand relaxed, and I read the lipstick note she had written him on a piece of paper towel:

"Donny: This man will kill me unless you kill him first. His gun will be in his clothes on the chair beside the bed. Come in and get it at midnight and shoot to kill. Good luck. I'll stay and be your girl if you do this, just like you always wished. Love. Ella."

I looked at the pair on the floor. She was rocking his lifeless head against her breast. Beside them, Gino looked very small and lonely, a dummy leaking darkness from his brow.

Donny had his wish and I had mine. I wondered what Ella's was.

"Q"

a **NEW Nick Velvet story by**

EDWARD D. HOCH

At the end of our editorial introduction to Edward D. Hoch's "The Theft of the Wooden Egg" (the Nick Velvet story in the July 1976 issue of EQMM), we wrote: "The ultimate will be when Nick is commissioned to steal nothing!—and paid his handsome fee to do it! (Mr. Hoch, are you listening?)"

Mr. Hoch was listening. Hardly said than done. Truly we think Mr. Hoch would accept any plot challenge. For here is Nick Velvet, the unique thief, stealing absolutely nothing—and getting paid more than his usual fee to do it, or rather not to do it—well, you know what we mean. We won't keep you another moment. . .

THE THEFT OF NOTHING AT ALL

by EDWARD D. HOCH

66 **N**othing?" Nick Velvet repeated incredulously. "Nothing at all," the fat man said, smiling at Nick's reaction.

"Let's get this straight. You'll pay me my usual fee of twenty thousand dollars to simply sit at home and steal nothing at all on next Thursday?"

"Exactly." The fat man, who said his name was Thomas Trotter, lit a cigar. "And if you're successful at it, I may want to hire you again for the following Thursday at the same fee."

"How could I not be successful?"

The fat man smiled again. Nick decided that he liked to smile. Perhaps he'd read somewhere that fat people are supposed to be jolly. "I think we understand each other, Mr. Velvet." He stood up to leave, taking a thick envelope from his inside pocket. "Here is

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one-half of the money now, in hundred-dollar bills. The rest will be paid on Friday, if you are successful in stealing nothing."

"I'll be successful," Nick assured him.

For the rest of the week, until Thursday, Nick puzzled over it. Thomas Trotter had come to him in the usual way, referred by someone in New York for whom Nick had once performed a service. And he couldn't believe that Trotter didn't want something for his money.

Something. But what?

"It's so good to have you home this week, Nicky," Gloria told him on Thursday evening. "Usually you're chasing off somewhere for the government and we never get to have much time together."

"Next week I'll be getting the boat out of drydock," he decided. "It should be warm enough on the Sound by then."

She glanced at the clock and headed for the television set. "You don't mind if I watch, do you, Nicky?"

"What? One of those crazy cop shows?"

"No, no. Not this early in the evening. It's the state lottery drawing."

Nick grunted and went out to the kitchen for a beer. He was vaguely aware that the state had begun televising the lottery drawings at 7:30 on Thursday evenings. Done up with blinking lights and screaming winners just like a network game show, it had proved to be the most popular Thursday night TV show in the state.

He went back with his beer and settled into a chair opposite the television, watching with mild interest. Gloria had got out her lottery tickets, waiting for the moment when this week's winners would be chosen. This was done by a complicated method involving a previously run horse race, coupled with the choosing and opening of a sealed tin can to reveal two of the digits.

When the grinning announcer finally called out the complete number, Gloria moaned. "Oh, Nicky, I was so close!"

"Better luck next week."

"The weekly winners all get a crack at the million-dollar jackpot drawing in three weeks."

"Hmmm." He picked up the evening paper.

"You're not even watching, Nicky!"

"Sure I am."

By the end of the evening when he went to bed, \$20,000 richer,

he'd pretty much decided that Thomas Trotter was nothing more than an eccentric millionaire.

He'd also decided to take the money again if it was offered for another Thursday of non-stealing.

"Well," Trotter said, slipping into the booth opposite Nick the following afternoon, "you did very well."

"I did nothing." If he'd been a detective, Nick might have been curious as to why a man who said his name was Thomas Trotter wore gold cuff links initialed *RR*.

"Just what I wanted you to do." Trotter signaled the waiter and ordered a glass of wine. Nick ordered a beer. "Would you like to do the same thing next Thursday?"

"For another twenty thousand?"

"Naturally."

It was Nick's turn to smile. "Sure!"

The fat man nodded and took an envelope from his pocket. "This is the balance on yesterday's assignment." Then a second envelope. "And this is your advance for next Thursday."

"Fine! You keep coming back as long as you want to!"

But by Monday, Nick was beginning to grow irritable. Gloria commented on it after dinner. "Nicky, what's the matter with you lately? You used to enjoy having time off to be around the house. Now everything seems to get on your nerves. And you haven't said any more about taking out the boat."

"I'm all right," he insisted.

But Thomas Trotter was bothering him. Another Thursday was coming—another theftless Thursday—and Trotter's weekly twenty grand was getting to him.

What in hell would he do if Trotter offered him the deal for a third week?

On Tuesday evening a call came. "Mr. Velvet?" the woman's voice asked.

"Speaking."

"I understand you steal things," she said bluntly.

"I don't discuss my business on the telephone. Perhaps we could meet somewhere."

"Could it be tonight? I'd want to hire you for this week."

"This week?" He thought of Thomas Trotter. "It wouldn't be Thursday, would it?"

"How'd you know?"

"I had a hunch." He gave her directions to a cocktail lounge in a nearby shopping center and arranged to meet her there in an hour.

"Going out, Nicky?" Gloria asked.

"For a while. Maybe it'll improve my mood."

The woman's name was Rona Felix and she was waiting for him alone in a booth near the back of the lounge. The place was very much like the one where he'd met Thomas Trotter, and Nick wondered if maybe some chain supplied suburban cocktail lounges with high-backed booths especially for couples carrying on illicit affairs.

Rona Felix probably wouldn't have been interested in that. Though she was still in her thirties she had the sour look of a woman whom life had passed by. The way she wore her hair, the lack of makeup, the frumpy coat that covered her shoulders—all spread the message that she was a woman who'd stopped caring about her looks.

"It's good to meet you, Mr. Velvet. I've heard a great deal about your exploits."

"Who from?"

"People you've helped. I understand you'll steal anything valueless for a fee of twenty thousand dollars."

"That's correct."

"Could you steal something for me this Thursday?"

"Never on Thursday," he said with a grin.

"What?"

"I'm otherwise occupied this Thursday."

"Oh." She seemed crestfallen. "I was counting on you."

Nick had once been kidnaped by a man to keep him from taking an assignment. He was beginning to wonder if the fat man had been up to the same sort of trick. "Could I ask you a question? Do you know someone named Thomas Trotter?"

"Trotter? I don't believe so."

"All right. Could you tell me what the job involves? Perhaps I could do it tomorrow. Or Friday."

She shook her head. "They only bring it out of the vault on Thursdays. It has to be a Thursday."

"I couldn't steal anything valuable enough to be kept in a vault."

"Could you steal a hundred tin cans?"

"I suppose so. It would depend on what's inside them."

"Just numbered plastic balls. The manufacturing cost is only a few dollars and their value to anyone would be absolutely zero."

"And yet they're kept locked in a vault every day but Thursday?"

"That's correct."

Nick thought about it. "You needn't tell me any more now, since I can't do it this Thursday in any event. But how about a week from Thursday?"

"All right," she agreed after a moment's hesitation.

"Meet me here next Monday night and you can fill me in on the details."

"Fine."

He smiled at her. "Now since you're a prospective client, let me buy you a drink."

"No, thank you. I have to be going."

"Very well. Till next Monday."

Nick went home and found Gloria ironing shirts. "That didn't take long, Nicky."

"I was just arranging for a future assignment." He glanced at the TV set, where a cop was chasing someone down a darkened alley. "Say, I noticed they have a studio audience for that lottery drawing on Thursday nights. If we can get tickets let's take a drive up there and see it."

"You mean it, Nicky? This Thursday?"

"Sure. I'll see about it."

He was beginning to think he should know more about such things.

The weekly drawing of the state lottery was telecast from an elaborate set in the studio of Channel 17 in the state capital. There were about 200 seats for the studio audience, and Nick had to rely on an old political friendship to obtain tickets on such short notice. But as he settled into his tenth-row seat next to Gloria, he saw at once that the journey had not been a vain one.

A short-skirted girl who served as the assistant to the master of ceremonies appeared from the wings, wheeling a cart on which rested 100 vacuum-sealed metal cans. As the show began the M.C. ran quickly through the standard procedure, explaining it to the few new viewers who might have tuned in. The winning number consisted of six digits, the last four of which were deter-

mined by a previously run horse race. For the first two digits a member of the studio audience was called on stage to choose one of the 100 sealed cans. The can was opened and a plastic ball bearing a two-digit number from 00 to 99 was extracted.

There it was.

Rona Felix was offering him \$20,000 to steal those 100 cans. He was certain of it. And he was just as certain that Thomas Trotter was paying him \$20,000 *not* to steal them.

The week's winning number proved to be 450098, and after it was determined, interest shifted to the six finalists from the previous drawing. These were holders of tickets which had five of the six digits correct, and they took part in a game-show type of competition for instant cash prizes.

"Didn't you enjoy it, Nicky?" Gloria asked on the way out.

"The whole thing seemed awfully complicated."

"They have to make it that way so there'll be no cheating," she explained.

"I suppose so."

The master of ceremonies, a toothy young man named Cappy Sloan, was standing at the door saying goodbye to the departing audience. This was his chance to build a show-business career on a lucky job with the state lottery, and he was making the most of it.

"Pardon me," Nick said. "Could I ask you something?"

Cappy Sloan shot him a smile. "Sure, as long as it's not next week's winning number. That I don't know!"

"I do some free-lance articles for our local newspaper downstate, and I was wondering if I might come in sometime and see how things are run backstage. Maybe next Monday or Tuesday I could get some pictures of the equipment—"

"It would have to be Thursday," Cappy informed him. "After the show all the equipment is locked in a special vault here at the studio. We can't have anyone tampering with it, you know. It doesn't come out again till next Thursday, a few hours before showtime."

"Could I call you about it next week?"

"Sure, sure! The state loves the publicity."

They went on their way and Gloria asked, "What was all that about, Nicky? You don't write articles."

"I might take it up," he said with a smile.

The next day was Friday, and Nick kept his appointment with

Thomas Trotter. The fat man was waiting in his usual booth, looking uncomfortable. "You're ten minutes late," he told Nick.

"Friday night traffic. Had a good week?"

"Until yesterday."

"What happened yesterday?"

"You were at the state capital, at the lottery telecast."

"Well, yes. We've been watching it on television and thought it might be fun to get tickets."

Trotter looked distasteful. "Was it fun?"

"Sure. You know, a night out. I didn't see you there."

"You were quite visible when the camera panned the audience." He took an envelope from his pocket. "But since you kept your agreement to steal nothing, here's the balance of your money."

"Thanks."

"The offer stands for another week."

"I may have an assignment for next Thursday."

"Cancel it."

"I can't offend a client," Nick said. "Their money is as good as yours."

Thomas Trotter leaned back. "All right, thirty thousand to steal nothing next Thursday. How's that?"

"I only charge thirty thousand for especially dangerous assignments."

"This could be especially dangerous for you if you cross me."

"All right," Nick said with a sigh. "Thirty thousand to steal nothing next Thursday. It's a deal." Whatever Trotter was up to, it was costing him a total of \$70,000 to have Nick do nothing.

"And stay away from the state lottery."

"Now wait a minute—that's not part of the agreement."

Trotter waved aside his objection. "All right, so long as I have your word you will steal nothing."

"You have it."

"I have only ten thousand with me. The other twenty will be paid next Friday. Same time, same place."

Nick stood up. "Mr. Trotter, it's a pleasure doing business with you."

On Monday he met Rona Felix as planned. It was a warm spring day and she wore a colorful print dress that made her seem a bit more feminine.

"Well?" she asked him. "Will you do it?"

"Steal one hundred tin cans next Thursday? I'm sorry, but I can't."

She was openly disappointed. "But I thought—"

"Miss Felix, I asked you last week if you knew a man named Thomas Trotter and you said no. Now I must ask you another question. Who knew you were planning to contact me?"

"Why . . . no one."

"Think carefully. Two weeks ago, a full week before you actually contacted me, I was approached by Trotter. Frankly, he's paying me a great deal of money in an obvious attempt to frustrate your plans."

"He is? Why would he do that?"

"I should tell you that I know the assignment involves the state-lottery drawing in some way," Nick said.

This seemed to startle her. "How could you—? Oh, I suppose you watch it on television. All right, it does concern the lottery. And for that reason the theft must be accomplished this Thursday. It's the last week before the grand drawing for the million dollars."

"So you're paying me twenty thousand to make a million."

"Not exactly." Hesitating a moment, she finally asked, "Why should I tell you any of this if you can't help me?"

"I may have some suggestions. And it's not costing you anything to talk."

"All right. If you're familiar with the lottery, you know that the first two digits of the winning number are chosen by opening one of a hundred vacuum-sealed aluminum cans, each containing a numbered plastic ball. The lottery commission has two sets of numbered balls, and the canning is done under guard by a local firm. One of the sets is always in the vault, and when it's removed on Thursday for the show it's immediately replaced with the other set for use the following Thursday. The canner picks up the entire used set each Thursday night for repackaging, though only one of the hundred cans has been opened."

"And you want me to steal the set of cans when it comes out of the vault. Why? What will it gain you?"

"I didn't know you asked so many questions."

Nick smiled. "If you want my help, I have to ask questions."

"Oh, very well! If the cans are stolen just before showtime, they'll be forced to use the set just delivered for the following week. And that's the set I want them to use."

"It's gimmicked."

She nodded. "The final drawing is foolproof, and I can't be sure of winning the million. But each of the weekly winners gets a minimum of \$100,000, and that's good enough for me."

"What about the horse race determining the final four digits?"

"That part has been attended to. It needn't concern you. The set of aluminum cans is my problem."

"You wanted to hire me for last week originally. If you'd gimmicked a set of cans at that time, wouldn't they be coming up for use this week?"

She shook her head. "It's not as simple as that. I don't know the number I need until I buy my lottery tickets for the week. Look, I'll give you an example. Suppose I know the horse race numbers are going to be 3456. I have to find a ticket to buy that ends in those numbers. It's not as impossible as it sounds in this state, because the numbered tickets are supplied to dealers in consecutive sheets and most places will let you look through the sheets to pick a lucky number. After trying a dozen or so places I'm likely to find a 3456."

"But for the first two digits I have to settle for whatever I get—say 123456. The sealed-up set of balls must be gimmicked to deliver a 12, but at this point the balls are already locked in the vault, immune from any sort of tampering. My only hope is to gimmick the new set of cans containing next week's numbered balls and then force the lottery to use that set a week early. That's where you come in. See?"

"My God!" Nick said with real awe. "How'd you ever dream up this thing?"

"My boy friend at the canning company helped."

Nick's first impression had been wrong. If she'd stopped caring about her looks, it was only because she already had a steady man. "But the person who chooses the can is picked at random, or else he's a guest dignitary. With all the cans unlabeled and identical, how can you possibly gimmick it?"

"The guard they send over with the cans every week is a joke. He sits and drinks coffee."

"Still—"

"And it's easy to substitute a box of a hundred cans for the box he's been watching. All I need is the two-digit number to give my friend a few days before Thursday, so he can prepare the gimmicked set of cans."

"Okay. Suppose you want to open a can and find a ball numbered 12. How do you gimmick it when the can's going to be chosen at random by an unknown person?"

"That should be obvious, Mr. Velvet. In the gimmicked set all hundred cans contain balls with the same number."

"And you think you can get away with this?"

"I'm sure I can. I've been watching the operation for a full year. They never open more than one can. There's no reason to."

"I have to admire your plan," Nick admitted. "I wish I could help."

"But you must! It all depends on you! Someone else might be caught stealing the cans, or might fail to even reach them with the guards and everything. It has to be you!"

Nick thought about it. He thought about the fat man's \$50,000, with twenty more to come. And he thought about this bright young woman's fantastic scheme.

There just might be a way . . .

"I'll see what I can do," he told her at last.

"This Thursday?"

"This Thursday."

To steal or not to steal.

Nick pondered the question all the next day, going over assorted plans and possibilities. He still didn't know where Trotter fitted into the picture, and that could be a danger.

On Wednesday afternoon Gloria found him in the kitchen, rummaging through a drawer. "What are you looking for, Nicky?"

"Just something I need. I was hoping we had one the right size, but I guess I'll have to go out and buy one."

She didn't question him further. After a dozen years of living with him she was used to his odd behavior.

On Thursday, Nick drove to the state capital and parked in the lot behind the Channel 17 studio. When the guard at the door stopped him he said he was there to see the lottery M.C., Cappy Sloan. After a five minute wait Sloan appeared. "Do I know you?" he asked Nick.

"You've probably forgotten. Last Thursday evening, after the telecast, you said I could come over this week and do a story on the lottery."

"Oh, yeah, I remember. Well, we're setting up for tonight. You can come in and watch if you promise not to get in the way."

Nick followed him down a long corridor and onto the large sound stage where the weekly sets and props for the state lottery were being assembled. "A lot of work here," Nick commented.

"Sure is! And especially this week. The Governor himself is coming tonight to lend his support. He'll choose the can containing the first two digits of the winning number."

"Really? I picked a good week to come."

"Yeah," Sloan agreed. "Say, what'd you tell me your name was?"

"Nicholas. Joe Nicholas."

"Well, Joe, back here is the studio's vault. The state had them build it special to store all this lottery paraphernalia between shows. And these are the hundred cans with their numbered balls."

Nick took note of the guard hovering nearby.

"After each show the cans are picked up by a local company that replaces the opened can and returns them all to us next Thursday. They just delivered 'em and we've put them in the vault for next week's show."

"Next week is the million-dollar drawing, right?"

"Sure is!" Cappy Sloan confirmed. "This week's winner is certain of a hundred thousand, but they'll also have a crack at that million-dollar jackpot."

Nick casually lit a cigarette. It tasted strange to him, since he hadn't smoked in years. "I'd like to see the board where you hang the winning number. I've got a little camera here and maybe I can snap a picture of you standing next to it."

Cappy Sloan grinned. "Sure, right over here."

As they passed a large wastebasket full of paper and debris from some previous show, Nick carefully flipped away his cigarette. He spent some time posing Sloan for the picture, and he wasn't at all surprised when he heard a stagehand bellow, "Fire!"

"Damn! That wastebasket's blazing!" Cappy Sloan ran to join the others in fighting the fire.

Nick made certain no eyes were on him and then pushed the cart containing the hundred tin cans behind a convenient curtain. He went at his task, working fast, knowing he'd have only a few minutes at the most. Though the smell of smoke was heavy in the air, the fire was quickly extinguished and he heard Cappy Sloan calling for him.

"Hey, Nicholas! Where'd you go?"

Nick kept working, One more minute . . .

"Nicholas!" Sloan called out.

"Right here," Nick replied. "Just looking around." He finished his task and stepped quickly around the curtain.

"Don't go wandering off," Sloan warned. "The guards don't like it."

"This is a fascinating setup," Nick said, leading Sloan away from the cart. "Where's the light board that flashes when one of the finalists wins?"

"That's over here."

They spent the next twenty minutes looking over the backstage setup. It was risky, Nick knew, because any minute someone might happen to glance at the cart. But he had to arrange for a proper exit.

"Cappy," a voice boomed from the control room, "the Governor's on his way."

"So soon? It's two hours till showtime."

"He's dining with the station executives. They want you there too."

"Damn! All right, I'll be there." He turned to Nick. "That completes the tour. Duty calls. But I'll arrange for a ticket so you can see the show."

"I'd appreciate that."

Cappy Sloan grabbed a tie and jacket he had tossed over the back of a chair and started to put them on. He was heading for the aisle, still knotting his tie, when a girl on stage shouted, "Cappy! What happened to these cans?"

He stopped and turned around. "What do you mean, what happened to them, Phyllis? What does it look like happened to them?"

"It looks like somebody opened them all with a can opener!"

"What!"

He was back on stage in an instant, inspecting the damage while the others clustered around. Nick edged toward the door but made no effort to escape.

"The balls are still inside," the girl said. "Someone just opened them and left them."

Sloan scratched his head. "Now who in hell would want to do that? What for?"

"A joke of some sort."

"Yeah. Only I don't see the humor." He thought about it and

finally decided, "Okay, get next week's set of cans out of the safe—we'll have to use them. And put them right out here at stage center where no one can fool with them!" He seemed to have forgotten Nick's absence for those few moments.

"First the fire and now this!" the girl said. "Is somebody sabotaging us?"

"No, no," Cappy Sloan soothed. "Don't you worry, Phyllis. By seven thirty we'll be on the beam. Now get that other set of cans out here. I've got to go eat with the Governor."

Nick decided things were going along better than he could have hoped for. He wandered outside and dropped the can opener down a convenient sewer, then went across the street to a lunch counter for a bite to eat.

He managed to be back in plenty of time for the 7:30 telecast, picking up his ticket and entering the studio just before seven. There was no sign of Rona Felix anywhere, but he was startled to see Thomas Trotter on stage. The fat man was talking earnestly with Cappy Sloan and inspecting the opened tin cans.

Nick spotted Sloan's assistant, Phyllis, and asked, "Do you know the man who's talking to Mr. Sloan?"

She glanced at Nick and then away, intent on more important matters. "That's the Governor's press secretary, Ramsey Reynolds."

Ramsey Reynolds, not Thomas Trotter.

All right, Nick decided, but that still doesn't tell me anything. Was it the Governor who'd really hired him, through Trotter-Reynolds? And what was the connection with Rona Felix and her scheme to fix the state lottery?

When the show began, he sat watching the people on stage go through their motions. Cappy Sloan came out, cracked a couple of bad jokes, and got right to the business at hand. The slip containing the order of finish for a previously run horse race was drawn with much fanfare—Nick wondered if the slips were all the same too—and the last four digits of the winning number were posted.

7821.

Then the Governor made his entrance, to a lengthy ovation. He was popular in the state, and he fed the popularity by public appearances like this one. He said a few words, then stepped over to the cart and selected one of the 100 aluminum cans. Cappy Sloan led him to an electric can opener where the top was removed and the plastic ball revealed. It was number 67.

The week's winning number, 677821, went up on the board. Nick hoped Rona Felix was holding it. If she wasn't, she'd wasted his \$20,000 fee.

Nick was feeling good as he filed out of the studio after the show. He was feeling good right up until the moment when he saw Thomas Trotter standing at the door with two burly State Troopers.

"Arrest that man!" Trotter ordered, pointing at Nick.

They took him to the police station and booked him on a variety of charges relating to tampering with the operation of the state lottery. He used his one phone call to tell Gloria he'd been called away overnight, and then settled down in his cell. It was a new experience for him, and one he hoped would be of short duration.

Late in the evening, close to eleven, Thomas Trotter came to his cell. "I tried to tell you that nobody crosses me, Velvet. I paid you not to steal anything today!"

"And I didn't," Nick answered with a smile.

"No? I checked with Cappy Sloan and he pointed you out in the audience. You're the only one who had the opportunity to open those hundred cans."

"I don't deny I opened them."

"Good! The District Attorney is outside and you can admit it to him."

"Seems like a minor crime to involve the D.A. in at eleven o'clock at night."

"The Governor asked him to see to it personally."

The District Attorney was a brisk, balding man obviously displeased at being there. "What is this foolishness, Reynolds?"

Nick grinned at the fat man. "I thought your name was Trotter."

"Shut up!" Then, turning to the District Attorney, he said, "Obviously he opened those cans in an attempt to cheat the lottery."

"I don't see how," the D.A. muttered. "What about it, Velvet? Why did you open those cans?"

"I overheard some men talking about a bomb in one of the cans. It was some sort of plot to kill the Governor. I didn't report it to the police because it seemed far-fetched. But I opened the cans myself just to make sure."

"What garbage!" Trotter said with a sneer. "Do you believe that for a minute, sir?"

"It's as good an explanation as any I've heard," the D.A. snapped. "We can't hold this man unless we can show criminous intent!"

"But I—"

"Step outside with me, Reynolds."

Nick relaxed as they left him alone. He was quite certain he wouldn't be spending much more time in this jail.

Presently the fat man returned, looking enraged. "He's dismissing the case against you for lack of evidence."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"But I'm not dismissing *my* case against you. I'm going to ruin you in this state, Velvet. I'm going to see you never get another job from anyone, and if you do I'm going to have the cops breathing down your neck so close that you'll end up in prison for life!"

"Now wait a minute," Nick protested. "I did exactly what you hired me to do. I stole nothing."

"But you opened those cans—"

"And took nothing from them. Oh, yes, I took *one* thing from them. By opening them I removed the vacuum from each can. I stole a vacuum, Trotter, and as any dictionary will tell you, a vacuum is a space entirely devoid of matter. A vacuum is nothing at all, and that's what I stole by opening those cans—nothing at all!"

The man he knew as Trotter mulled this over. "Who paid you?" he asked finally. "It was that Felix woman, wasn't it?"

"How do you know her?" Nick countered.

"I know her boy friend. He works at the canning plant."

"So you got onto her scheme through him. She said she was going to hire me and you hired me first."

"That's right," Trotter admitted. "It was for the good of the state. I didn't want anyone cheating on the lottery."

"For the good of the state you paid me fifty thousand dollars? That's hard to swallow. It's a lot more likely you've got your own scheme for collecting that million-dollar prize. You're in it with Rona Felix's friend yourself, only poor Rona was going to get left out in the cold. You heard from him that she was planning to hire me, and you thought that the money you paid me was a good investment to keep me away for three weeks till your stooges could win the million. Right?"

"That's ridiculous!"

"Is it? I wonder what your boss the Governor would think."

Trotter was silent for a moment. Finally he opened the door and said, "Get out, Velvet. You're free to go. Get out and never let me see you again."

Nick didn't need to be told twice. He paused only long enough to say, "Remember, you still owe me twenty thousand for stealing nothing today." Then he hurried out.

The steel door slammed behind him.

Nick met Rona Felix the following day and collected his fee. All had gone according to plan and she showed him the winning ticket. "Next Thursday I'll be a hundred thousand—or maybe a million—richer!"

"I'm happy for you," Nick said. "Good luck—I'll be watching."

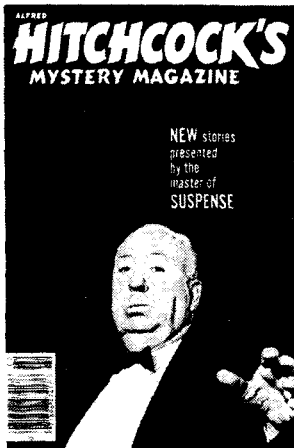
But as it turned out, he wasn't watching on Thursday night and neither was anyone else. Thursday morning's papers carried the story under bold headlines: *Governor Suspends Lottery Pending Inquiry: Press Secretary Reynolds Resigns.*

"Did you see this, Nicky?" Gloria asked, shaking the paper at him. "The District Attorney became suspicious of this Ramsey Reynolds after Thursday night's drawing and started examining the lottery equipment. He discovered the cans the Governor chose from all contained balls with the same number. And now Reynolds has resigned and last week's drawing has been voided! Isn't that amazing?"

Nick thought about Rona Felix, who was destined to miss her big moment on television. And he thought about the total of \$70,000 he'd collected for stealing nothing at all. He'd been the big lottery winner without even buying a ticket!

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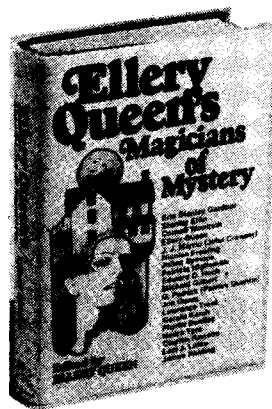
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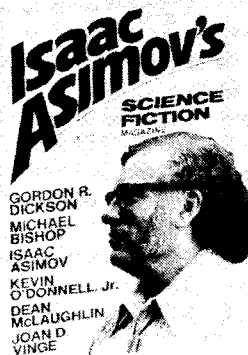
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